

Reviewed by Nora Stone

# *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*

edited by Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson.

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Over the past twenty years, documentary film and television have become far more popular and widely available than in previous decades. Yet the scholarship on documentary has tended to privilege the most formally inventive and politically radical documentary films, from *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961) to *Tongues Untied* (Marlon T. Riggs, 1989) and *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012). Noël Carroll pointed out this tendency to focus on the “art-documentary” in 1996, and the trend has continued.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to dismiss popular documentaries, from fawning celebrity portraits to protracted true-crime miniseries, but doing so leaves a vital area of film and media understudied at the very moment when audiences are viewing and engaging with documentary media more than ever before.

*Reclaiming Popular Documentary* is an excellent start to correcting this oversight. Edited by Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson, the volume contains invigorating contributions that cover a wide swath of documentary media. In the introduction, Milliken and Anderson ask, “What is the relationship between documentary and entertainment and between popular documentary and advocacy? Can popular documentary be productively reconceived in relation to genre, modes, or rhetorical forms? Assuming the

1 Noël Carroll, “Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Skepticism,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 293.

popular is defined in contrast to other categories (either implicitly or explicitly), what might those other categories be?”<sup>2</sup> The editors’ capacious framing is wise because documentary’s commercial relevance has not drained it of truth-telling potential or political urgency. The entrance of documentary into the mainstream media marketplace has only complicated its cultural standing.

The anthology’s first section covers the exhibition contexts of popular documentary. Contributors Ezra Winton and Patricia Aufderheide consider two institutions that remain important to the documentary film ecosystem: the film festival, specifically Toronto’s Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, and public television, including the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). The choice to foreground these two institutions is strategic—a reminder that while streaming services have invested heavily in documentary films and series, they are not the saviors of documentary. Film festivals and public television continue to be central sites for the circulation of documentaries, formation of critical consensus, and launch of new documentarians’ careers. Archivist Rick Prelinger suggests some imaginative alternatives to these stalwart if imperfect institutions, however, in the book’s final section, “Engaging Audiences.” In film events such as *Lost Landscapes of San Francisco* (2006–2020) and *No More Road Trips?* (2013), Prelinger has assembled archival footage of a particular place or activity and screens it for audiences who are encouraged to react and chime in during the screening. The popularity of these film events is a strong argument for creating new spaces and conditions for communal engagement with documentary cinema. Prelinger acknowledges that his practice appears arcane against the streaming service landscape. He writes, “I do not seek to bury the algorithm. But I question any retreat from public assembly, especially if such retreat occurs under the rubric of engagement, as so much interactive cinema asserts. . . . I would also argue that restoring big-screen experience coupled with direct, dialogical participation is a route toward staging the meeting of difference without its dilution, a means to an end rather than an end in itself.”<sup>3</sup>

The most groundbreaking section of *Reclaiming Popular Documentary* is its third, “Short Forms and Web Practices.” The short online documentary is of outsized importance in today’s mediascape but has commanded comparatively little scholarly attention within documentary studies. Anthony Kinik, Michael Brendan Baker, and Allison de Fren explore what the prevalence of short web docs means for professional and amateur documentarians—who they partner with, what subjects they take on, and how they develop their formal strategies—as well as for people who watch, share, and comment on them. For instance, Kinik investigates the convergence of documentary film and journalism. As the internet thoroughly transforms print journalism, leading newspapers and magazines have begun hosting short documentary

2 Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson, “Pop Docs: The Work of Popular Documentary in the Age of Alternate Facts,” in *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, ed. Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 5.

3 Rick Prelinger, “Populism, Participation, and Perpetual Incompletion: Performing an Urban History Commons,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 337.

videos of every kind: “prosaic, poetic, philosophical, pointedly political, and so on—and in all different styles.”<sup>4</sup> Kinik studies this development through Errol Morris’s Op-Docs and column for the *New York Times*. He argues that the exhibition context of these short documentaries—publication on a leading newspaper’s website—radically effects on their meaning. Baker meanwhile compares short online music documentaries to feature-length music documentaries, which have been the most popular subgenre of documentary for decades. Citing independent productions, such as *A Take Away Show* (Vincent Moon, 2006–), and short documentaries from Pitchfork Media, Vevo, and Red Bull Music Academy, Baker finds that creators mostly hew to the conventions of feature-length music documentaries. He argues, “Where once new technologies and means of delivery would prompt the exploration of new horizons of aesthetic possibility ad infinitum, video on the web has, for the most part, crystallized existing representational practices.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, de Fren works to locate video essays historically and in relation to the essay film, bringing together insights about the industrial imperatives and platform strictures that have shaped the video essay. If you have seen Tony Zhou and Taylor Ramos’s series *Every Frame a Painting* (YouTube, 2014–2017) or laughed at fan-made supercuts, you know that the web-hosted video essay is a major development in film culture. De Fren introduces key video essayists, including Zhou and Ramos, Kogonada, and Kevin B. Lee. She examines their aims and compositional strategies, explores how they deal with copyright restrictions, and reveals how they make a living (or don’t) from their work. De Fren also piquantly compares essay films and video essays, contrasting the early city symphony *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1921) with *Terrence Malick’s City Symphony* (Conor Bateman, 2016) and *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (Thom Andersen, 2004) with “Vancouver Never Plays Itself” (Tony Zhou and Taylor Ramos, 2015). While essay films and video essays share formal qualities, de Fren argues that video essays are focused on cinephilia, with an auteurist bent. In contrast, essay films point outward, proposing new ways of “seeing and thinking facilitated by formal experimentation.”<sup>6</sup> By integrating short web docs into documentary film studies, Kinik, Baker, and de Fren provide historical context and meaningful comparisons for this increasingly prevalent documentary media.

The fifth section, “Documentary Genres,” features powerful essays that advance long-running debates in documentary studies about appropriate or effective appeals to emotion. In her chapter on popular documentary as melodrama, Milliken refuses to dismiss the melodramatic mode as necessarily objectionable in nonfiction film. Drawing on melodrama scholars Christine Gledhill, Thomas Elsaesser, and Linda Williams, Milliken shows how melodrama’s exaggerated emotionalism, pathos, and moral judgment are key

4 Anthony Kinik, “Errol Morris, the *New York Times*, Docmedia, and Op-Docs as Pop Docs,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 121.

5 Michael Brendan Baker, “Popular Music and Short-Form Nonfiction: Is the Web a Forum for Documentary Innovation?,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 139.

6 Allison de Fren, “From the Essay Film to the Video Essay: Between the Critical and the Popular,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 159.

to the success of many popular documentary films. “More often than we perhaps acknowledge,” she notes, “representations of *the* world in documentary are often framed through moralistic, narrativized appeals to our sense of justice.”<sup>7</sup> Milliken argues that although melodrama can make complex issues simplistic, it can also produce positive effects in audiences, such as inspiring or mobilizing them.

Dylan Nelson’s entry in this section also intervenes in filmmakers’ and philosophers’ long-standing debates about visualizing atrocity. Does using archival images and footage reduce global traumas such as the Holocaust to mere evidence, as Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah* (1985), has asserted? Nelson writes forthrightly about her decision, as a producer and researcher on *Nanking* (Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman, 2007), to use eyewitness accounts and archival footage to represent the 1937 Nanking Massacre. She offers a nuanced account of how to balance making a “visceral, immersive” documentary and use archival footage responsibly, observing that “[d]espite the inherent unreliability of archival images, discussed further in this chapter, we [the filmmakers of *Nanking*] believe these images’ evidentiary value outweighs the potential harm done by their reproduction. Archival images are fragments—but fragments are all we have, and we should use them, albeit with humility and self-awareness, in spite of all.”<sup>8</sup>

Although their essays appear in different sections, Shilyh Warren and Landon Palmer mutually offer insight into documentaries that managed to be equally commercial and committed. Warren explores the “feminist vérité” documentaries of Lauren Greenfield, including *Thin* (2006), *The Queen of Versailles* (2012), *Generation Wealth* (2018), and *The Kingmaker* (2019).<sup>9</sup> She offers incisive commentary about why Greenfield’s work, which, despite its commercial success, has received little attention from either documentary scholars or feminist scholars. Palmer digs into the recovery subgenre of popular music documentary.<sup>10</sup> Recovery documentaries highlight an overlooked figure or group, such as Sixto Rodriguez in *Searching for Sugar Man* (Malik Bendjelloul, 2012) and backup singers in *20 Feet from Stardom* (Morgan Neville, 2013). Because the narrative thrust of recovery documentaries is the rewriting of popular music history, they may appear to take a critical approach to the topic. However, Palmer points out that recovery documentaries often use strategies that reify extant musical canons and validate the contemporary music industry, thus limiting their historical intervention and radical potential. Warren’s and Palmer’s clear-eyed analyses contribute to a deeper understanding of recent, commercially successful documentaries.

The essays of *Reclaiming Popular Documentary* represent a diversity of perspectives, but that very variety leaves the volume feeling unfocused.

7 Christie Milliken, “Of Kids and Sharks: Victims, Heroes, and the Politics of Melodrama in Popular Documentary,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 245.

8 Dylan Nelson, “Assembling *Nanking*: Archival Filmmaking in the Popular Historical Documentary,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 281.

9 Shilyh Warren, “Vérité: Lauren Greenfield and the Challenge of Feminist Documentary,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 201.

10 Landon Palmer, “Strategies of the Popular Music Documentary’s Recovery Mode,” in Milliken and Anderson, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, 259.

Some of the entries, for instance, instrumentalize a specific documentary as an example of a theory. Absent archival research, close formal analysis, or research into distribution and reception, this practice has little yield. On the whole, however, *Reclaiming Popular Documentary* is an indispensable collection of forward-looking scholarship. The entries are original and teachable, stimulating thinking about documentary outside of the frame of art cinema. In addition to being a useful text for documentary film and TV classes, entries could be integrated into classes on social media, activist media, and melodrama. They lead the way toward a reinvigorated study of popular documentary media.

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