

In Defense of Political Documentary

The presence of the term document in documentary is a contentious matter. The other nomenclature non-fiction is even more problematic. The moral insinuation of both the terms has been plaguing this genre since its inception. Documentary due to its relation with document implies proof of authenticity and non-fiction asserts the privilege of being factual. These implications, in turn, lead us to a kind of linearity, a fixed text, a representation of 'the' truth. This comes from the tendency of treating 'fact' or 'authenticity' as truth. Let us have a look at the beginning of this genre.

Authenticity of Actuality

In 1895 the Lumiere brothers showed the first shot of cinema in history – the train entering the station. It was a reality shot or actuality shot. There were theatre, ballets, street performances in Paris – but the Lumiere brothers shot streets, factory gates etc. Milese, one of the greatest filmmakers of the silent era, who attended the Lumiere brothers' show noticed that the audience was more engaged with the moving foliage, or crushing waves or flying dust than the moving people in the frame. They had seen human beings and their actions in theatre but the animated scenery was what caught their attention – made it an 'actuality' show. **Since then proving the authenticity of actuality has become a major preoccupation for non-fiction films.**

Constructing the Real

In 1898 two cameramen of Vitagraph Company of America went to Cuba to shoot the Spanish-American war. When they came back they realized that they had not shot the most important part of the war – the Battle of Santiago Bay. The whole city was waiting to see the footage and admitting to not have shot it meant a huge loss of revenue. Street vendors were selling stills of that war. They bought pictures of the battle ships, made them float on a tub of water, put some gun powder on the top, attached some strings to activate them and made smoke out of cigars. The person who was smoking the cigar-wife of one of the men- was not a smoker and could not provide a continuous flow of smoke. So the battlefield did not look as dense as it should have been. Still they composed the battle scene, shot it and made it run in public screenings for months. That most probably was first instance of special effect cinema. **But that most probably was also the first instance of documentary's uneasy relationship with 'reality'.**

Fixing the Other

In 1913-14 twenty two year old White American Jessica Brothwicke spent a year in the Balkans filming wars and the natives. Her account:

During the cholera rage in Adrianpole, everything connected with that terrible disease was painted black. The carts in which the dead bodies were carried were black, for example, as were the coffins in which cholera victims were buried. While the scourage was at its height, I went down into the gypsy quarter to take a film. The people in this part of the city had never seen a camera before, and when they saw me pointing my black box at various objects they thought I was operating some wonderful new instruments for combating the disease which was destroying them. Quickly surrounding me. They came

and knelt upon the ground, kissing my feet and clothing, and begging with dreadful pathos that I should cure them. 1

In 1914 the word 'documentary' was used for the first time in a prospectus of America's Continental Film Company for 'In the Land of Head Hunters', a film on the Red Indians by ethnographer Edward S. Curtis.

Making of the Nation

In 1939 the Second World War began. An era of ideological upheaval that was: radical nationalism, capitalist imperialism, and totalitarian states of socialism, ultra-xenophobia, and independence for European colonies in Asia and of course, fascism. The documentary filmmaking never had it better (notwithstanding the films around first world war). Generous state patronage came, new technology was developed, young professionals were encouraged - all to propagate the cause of war through the hair-raising war footage. The publicity office of Hitler discovered Leni Reifinstahl – the Arriflex camera was developed according to her requirement and 60 cinematographers (in 1936) were made available to her to shoot the Olympics. She shot some of the most effective military footage: the mother of political documentary genre. To counter her work, ideology and her footage there were Russians and other East European filmmakers. But the grammar book was already written. Political documentary means- fearless men in files cut to their feet conquering/freeing the earth for the mother/fatherland, top angle of thousands of files rendering geometrical patterns cut to track shot of erect shoulders cut to a beautiful child waving at them, at their courage and martyrdom cut to close shot of rifles on the shoulder of the men passing the frame, threatening to destroy anybody or anything which dares to touch the smile of that child cut to rough terrain of the battle field and so on and so forth.

Projecting the magnified close up of the mundane (dust flying, train coming...), constructing a 'real' according to the audience's imagination (Vitograph's bathtub war), discovering and capturing the other (the Balkan natives and the head hunters), manufacturing a nationalist brand through spectacles (Leni Reifinsthal)...till today these are the formal mainstay of the documentaries.

The Indian Scenario

In the Indian subcontinent this phase came in the '50s. In 1943, the British Raj set up two establishments: The Information Films of India and the India News Parade with the sole objective of propagating the cause of the war. At the end of the war, in April 1946, the central legislative council was constituted as a precursor of exchanging power to the Indian Government. The council demanded to close down the two production houses, as they were mainly tools of British interest. Soon after independence Jawaharlal Nehru realized that the newly formed country needed a mechanism to reach out to the vast population who are multi-lingual, multi-cultural, unaware of the notion of the nation and state and mostly illiterate. He took special interest in reviving a set up which was earlier British News Parade. The Film Division started in 1948. The gaze of the plains of central India traveled to the remotest corners of the country and shot the subjects, the **other**

people within the Indian state. The films were a mixer of War film and anthropological film, in style and aesthetics. The vast, top angle shots of the land- where the human beings are part of one linear category- made so popular by the war films (so an army is an army and a Banjara is a Banjara) and the close shots of detailed picturisation of the alien customs and people – an anthropological device- were held in alternative shots. The wide top angle shots for the authenticity of the locales that are not part of the mainland. The closer shots are for anthropological curiosity, presenting a few chosen details of the others who exist outside the normative practices.

The Mizos, the Kukis, the Kashmiris, the Banjaras – and the benevolent state. To this day, the Govt. of India gives out a national award section for Best Anthropological/ ethnographical film of the year.

This trend was countered in the late '70s. Soon after the notion of Nation-State was significantly challenged by the Naxalite movement and other organized political formations of left and left of center ideologies independent political documentaries of the region were born. Famine was shot, so was homelessness, state atrocities, migration, women victims of domestic and sexual violence, issues of land ownership etc. became important. Gautam Ghosh, Utpalendu Chakravarty, Anand Patwardhan, Meera Nayar, Suhasini Mulay, Tapan Bose etc. were some of the significant names of that era. They all came from a certain political background. They knew their subjects, their terrains. They wanted to make the films in order to prove and disseminate what they already knew as truth. In the process of the film they laid out facts in front of the audience in order to build public opinion. They had the kind of confidence in their arguments to hold a mid shot of the interviewees for minutes. These films were mainly edited on the dialogue tracks – polemics being supreme.

The myth of the benevolent state was duly shattered. For the first time instead of exotic people, hungry and tortured humans came up as protagonists; instead of ritualistic song and dance, the minority people of the lands beyond central India voiced their anger, fear and frustration common to minorities in any totalitarian country; instead of the plastic gloss of national pride, the basic formation of the modern state was questioned. Many feature films of the time were in fact, inspired by these documentaries. Some of these filmmakers later shifted to feature filmmaking, of the political kind. But these films did something interesting to the aesthetics of documentaries, as well as the way that people viewed them. They revisited the issue of authenticity. In a way it was a war of authenticities. As against the classical anthropology of the Film division, a genre of political anthropology began. The issues were tackled by the dense dialogue tracks of the protagonists aiming towards a principle act of opinion making or in more serious cases it became a form of **Tutelage**. But the format and the aesthetics remained broadly the same. In some sense this genre depended heavily on the aesthetics of the very ideology that it had set out to oppose. Framed differently, this genre of filmmaking made a new genre of anthropological subjects: away from the alien people of the exotic land, it was the **victim** of the nation-state who came under the lens. Still the equidistance between the subject, the filmmaker and the audience remain the same. And this happened as the primary agenda of making opinion with the help of facts remained the same. There is always a

triangle: of the filmmaker who collates and presents the facts, the protagonist who is the fact and the audience who receives the fact.

There was another problem. As far as the private screening was concerned, the opportunities were rare and far between. Besides, the ordinary people, after being exposed to compulsory viewing of inane documentaries of FD (it was the state mandate to screen a documentary before every feature film), got allergic to the word documentary. Hence only a privileged/elite/politicized audience viewed the documentaries of 70's and 80's. Some filmmakers, though, traveled around the country with a film projector and cans of films on their shoulders. But every filmmaker could not be that militant and thus got lost in the oblivion. By the '80s the film society movement became very popular in India. But even their members strongly resented documentary films for being lesser in aesthetics and being didactic.

Facts and Truths: Very soon this genre got into deep trouble, trouble which has now grown into a full bodied phenomena. The centre of the problem is the dependence on fact for a certain truth. Remember the advertisement of the news channels: For truer than the truth switch onto XYZ. The embedded CNN journalists in the Iraq war shot the facts from the closest range. But what happened to Truth in that process of shooting fact from close quarters! You get American propaganda in support of the Iraq invasion. During Gujarat carnage the television channels shot the same footage that the independent filmmakers did. By the time the independent filmmakers finished their films- with whatever deeper understanding of the issue they were to offer- the audience was in a state of visual fatigue.

Aestheticising the Issue

The problem was in not addressing the issue of truth formally and making too much dependence on fact. In short, lack of engagement with aestheticising the issue, which would itself make the argument richer than the dialogue tracks. I would like to discuss a scene in the film **Shoot for the Content**, made by Vietnamese-American filmmaker TrinT Minh ha.

The film is about contemporary China. Minh ha, the outsider in China, sets in to a complex journey into the various realities of the country. Throughout the film she evolves various formal devices to constantly remind us that we are watching is a film made by an outsider. In one scene a Chinese filmmaker gives interviews on state censorship. The scene starts with a shot of a bright spotlight in the middle of the pitch-dark screen. We hear the interview in Chinese followed by para dubbing in English. After a while we realize that actually the camera is moving very slowly and the bright spot in the frame getting closer. In the middle of the interview, as the camera keeps moving in, we realize that the bright spot is actually an image of the interpreter who is lit in disturbingly bright and flat light. The black space in the frame is the shoulder of the censored filmmaker. The camera keeps moving, eventually most of the frame gets filled up with the brightly lit close up of the interpreter and the back of the filmmaker grows more and more marginal in the frame. 2

I would argue that this is one of the finest examples of **aestheticising the issue**. Such a scene encourages the audience to participate in the reality beyond listening to the dialogue track. The agenda shifts from opinion making through facts to experiencing reality by participating in extracting meaning. This is not a formal issue only, but a political engagement and a cerebral invitation.

The Other Films of Ours

Something interesting started happening since late '80s. Two very distinct phenomena developed: a spectacular rise in biographical films and a formal style where the filmmaker's personal position and his/ her relationship with the protagonist became part of the text. The second issue, at its basics was dealt with first person narratives. But at a more complex level it was dealt with formally: by camera positioning, by editing style, by using footage which had nothing to do with the proclaimed agenda, sometimes even by the choice of the title.

There are distinct attempts to place the ordinariness of an ordinary individual into the reading of the Nation/State. The debate, the polemics around citizenship is still there, but there is an attempt to aestheticise that in opposition to 'discovery' and 'proof' of earlier anthropological attempts. And part of that aestheticising is to give the person, the citizen more space than what functionally an agenda allows. In short: make a portrait and not only a dialogue track argument. The protagonists of these films are not the FD (Film Division) models - subjects of the benevolent state, nor are they simple victims of state oppression. Many of them are ordinary people with no such tall claim in official history. These films make them architects of the citizenship discourse instead of reducing them to case studies. Sameera Jain's series on Portraits of Belonging (Bhai Miyan, the kite maker and Sageera Begum, the artisan) is a fine example of this genre. In post 1992 Delhi Bhai Miyan talks about the special kite set of 150 Indian national flags that he created to celebrate 50 years of independence. The two artisans, Bhai Miyan and Sageera Begum, talk about memory as part of proactive action in nation building with excellent articulation, dislodging the normative subaltern victim narrative.

One prominent trend in this genre was to read an artist and his/her memory. In this genre there is a candid recognition that what we are seeing is also a kind of performance, on the part of the protagonist. The text is not what the protagonist is, but how he/she desires us to conceive him/her. The validity of the protagonist and the authenticity of the films do not come from the actuality but from the essence of these people's memories and desires. In some senses it displaces the fact for the sake of the 'truth' which emerges through a person's performance of his or her 'self' in front of the camera. Allowing the protagonist to do that and allowing the audience to see through that is part of the formal development.

These performances, a combination of the subjective memory of the protagonist and his/her desire for a particular kind of projection of the self for future reading – make the biographic films part of the current debate on citizenship. So there is a distinct shift from the 'victim' narrative to a proactive role in constituting the 'citizen' – the citizen who is

constantly being made in interaction between the memory of the past and desire for the future. Since the process of recording this development is part of the film text, the filmmaker and the audience become a part of that exercise of constituting the 'citizen'.

Many of these filmmakers are women; an overwhelming number of the protagonists are also women. But it has quite smoothly and non-aggressively surpassed the confines of the domestic space while portraying the female protagonists. Once out of the need to prove the validity of the choice by establishing the victim status of the protagonists (a common phenomena in the '80s and earlier times), the filmmakers could place the gender issue at the centre of the map of the nation/state and citizenship.

Unlike in the feature film world, in documentaries works of other South Asian countries are not at all hegemonised by the Indian milieu. I shall end this article by citing two excellent works from Bangladesh and Pakistan around the theme of politics in the biographies of non-political citizens. The Bangladesh liberation war gets revisited in Yasmeen Kabeer's **Swadhinata** (A Certain Liberation) where Gurudasi Mondal, the archetypal vagrant mad woman represents the nation, by completely opting out of it. The beggar Gurudasi, who had witnessed the massacre of her entire family during the liberation war, does not play the role of protagonist. She counters the very vantage position of the protagonist by denying to be rooted to any conceivable identity. The citizenship discourse itself collapses when she chooses to be a 'by choice' vagrant – an intangible identity, right in front of the camera. Even the weight of being a protagonist of a film can not make her enter the arena of the nation-state.

In 1997, Farjad Nabi of Pakistan made **Nusrat has left the building... but when**, a sad and hilarious film on neo-colonialism in cultural practices. This is a film in absentia, made after the demise of Nusrat. The film is constructed around various public/popular images of Nusrat. The film, in a convoluted way, becomes an autobiography of the filmmaker - an aspiring young artist, at the beginning of cultural homogenization in the era of globalization. The angst, the desire and the melancholy that the filmmaker weaves around the perception of Nusrat, represents the anxiety of South Asian youth cultures in the minutest detail and the film becomes a contemporary bhakti/sufi text. 3

At the end of the film *Kamlabai* (the first screen actress in India who was 88 years old during the making of the film) by Reena Mohan, Kamlabai gets fed up with the paraphernalia of being in front of the camera. She wants some other excitement and asks cheekily 'whats the programme for this evening?' The amused director teases her 'the camera is on'.... Kamlabai - the protagonist, the actress- contemplates the dialogue "...oon... camera is on..."

These are distinct films among the sea of films that have got produced in the subcontinent in this period. These are biographical films with an agenda related to nationalism, they are non-linear with sublime aesthetics and yet screechingly political. The number of films produced in this genre is growing in leaps and bounds. Encouraged by the easily available digital technology the filmmakers today can afford to spend more time with the protagonists, developing layered engagements and also altering their own agenda in the

process. While the current trend of cultural theory tends to make all ideologies utopian and pushes contemporaneity to exist in a 'post-ism' (post-feminist, post-modern, post-industrial and so on) blankness, the practice of political documentary is expanding its scope and definition in the most unlikely mode of nationalism.

Madhusree Dutta

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1 *Source: the war, the West and the Wilderness, Kevin Brownlow, Knopfler, New York 1979*

2 Shoot for the Content. Directed by Trin T Minh ha, 1991

3 There are many more distinguished films and filmmakers in South Asia who are working on the language of political documentaries. The names mentioned here are only examples and not any kind of representation.

