



THE SUBJECT OF DOCUMENTARY



Michael Renov

suggest that L.A. Link operates at a great remove from the modernist documentary ethos. It is interested in opening up a space of interpersonal contact, of receptiveness to and “dwelling with” the other, rather than closing down or refining a path of rational inquiry anchored to a territorializing discourse. L.A. Link functions in accord with the concentrated or productive listening that philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara has described as the repressed side of a coercive logos. In *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, she returns to Heidegger’s remarks on the etymological linkage of “logos” (in the Greek, *legein*), whose legacy is principally that of “saying,” to the German word *legen*, which means to lay down or lay before. Fiumara argues that logos has, within Western culture, devolved into a “saying-without-listening” that subordinates the sheltering and receptive side of language—fundamentals of the maieutic method—to the assertiveness of discourse.⁴¹ And no variant of filmic discourse is more assertive than the documentary that Nichols has famously described as constitutively argument based. I therefore pose the L.A. Link project as a sort of tentative antipode to the documentary project as defined in modernist terms. It is an enterprise intended to explore various electronic technologies’ listening potential, their ability to provide a shelter for receptivity rather than a scaffolding for argument or a bridge for spatiotemporal conquest.

I want to say only a few things about Daniel Reeves’s remarkable videotape *Obsessive Becoming*, although it certainly deserves far more extended treatment than can be accorded it here. I wish to single out for attention the morphing technique utilized in the tape. In the hands of Daniel Reeves, the digital technology that, as with the Quantel Domino system, has proved capable of seamlessly grafting simulated objects onto indexical representations is used instead to undermine verisimilitude. Reeves has called his approach in this tape “ragged magical realism.”⁴² Through digitizing numerous photographs of various family members and reconfiguring them as discrete computer files, it became possible for Reeves, laboriously and over a five-year period, to control the rate at which a single photographic image liquefies and congeals into another. Lines of gender and generation no longer hold sway; the traumas of Reeves’s own childhood are evoked and yet superseded and transmuted under his meditative gaze. Through hypnotic narration (Reeves’s own voicings), the overlay of diverse, often haunting musical phrases, and the fluid intermingling of images, Reeves ushers his audience into a “liminal zone,” a space of heightened receptivity.

Reeves’s is a worldview aligned with Zen Buddhist principles more



In Daniel Reeves's *Obsessive Becoming*, a single family photo liquefies and congeals into another, crossing lines of gender and generation. Reprinted with permission.

than rationalist ones. He suggests that the genetic material that becomes "us" is but one register of our being; we are the source and temporary container of countless other beings to whom we are linked and thus in some measure responsible. To the strains of the Moscow Liturgic Choir and over a liquid array of morphed visages captured from tattered family albums, Reeves intones the following near the end of *Obsessive Becoming*:

If I raise my hand to the light, I can see my dead mother in the palm. I see the way I spring from her in every moment. I see her face. I see her face before she was born and her face before her father was born. They move together in every moment like a garland of water. And like writing on water that cannot be held, they are always becoming, forever moving, forever entwined.

Here we are far from the genealogical models dear to science that trace heredity as linear and irreversible. Modernism, for its part, has given us the eugenics of textbooks and clinics, irrevocably bound to dreams of racial purity. Reeves shows us the cyclical nature of becoming and re-becoming, doing so most dramatically through the plasticity of his digitized portraitures. In *Obsessive Becoming* as in Bauman's characterization of videotape as postmodernist medium, the self is less the repository of sovereign identity than the site of an endless recycling, a surface "calculated not to hold anything forever." If some manner of radical doubt is engendered regarding absolutist notions of truth or knowledge, the deeper challenge is leveled at the ontological status of the image and of the self that is the image's source.

Jim Campbell, trained as an electrical engineer at MIT, is now among the most accomplished makers of digital interactive art. He is something of a *bricoleur*, using an array of materials both strange and familiar, recycled and custom engineered: from weathered family photographs, a cheap Timex pocket watch, and a bucketful of salt to ultrasonic sensors, self-designed computer programs, and custom electronics. But the real substance of Campbell's installations is ideas yielded through a participant's interaction with the work on display. These ideas are often inchoate; they are about the self in relation to time, memory, and desire. But for the present purposes, Campbell's oeuvre is notable for the way in which devices irreducibly scientific in their provenance are used to thwart the rationalist principles so often attributed to modernism, defying the "human demand for factual sustenance" once described by Richter.

The impact of Campbell's work is entirely bound up with its interactive character. If, as has been suggested here, modernism has engendered a search for authoritative discourses and passive recipients, art tailored to that model has proved adept at creating works of great originality and force that nevertheless function as one-way conduits rather than reciprocal conversations. Art is in this sense yet another variant of the logos as assertive discourse with the listening component repressed. In its interactivity, Campbell's work undermines the hierarchical character of traditional art; it requires the participation of the viewer to create its meaning.

In *Digital Watch* (1991), Campbell creates a warp of time and space into which the participant enters. One black-and-white video camera,

“In the thick of calls to rethink the representation of the Other, Michael Renov asks us to rethink the representation of the self. From Montaigne to Mekas, and from *Sherman's March* to autobiographical Web sites, Renov expands our concept of ‘visible evidence’ to encompass the self in profoundly revealing ways.”

BILL NICHOLS, AUTHOR OF *REPRESENTING REALITY: ISSUES AND CONCEPTS IN DOCUMENTARY AND INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTARY*



In *The Subject of Documentary*, Michael Renov focuses on how documentary filmmaking has become an important means for both examining and constructing selfhood. Whether chronicling family history, sexual identity, or a personal or social world, the new generation of nonfiction filmmakers has defiantly embraced autobiography. By looking at key figures in documentary filmmaking as well as noncanonical video art and avant-garde artists, Renov broadens the definition of what counts as documentary.

Offering historical context for the explosion of personal nonfiction filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s, Renov analyzes films from Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* to Jonas Mekas's *Lost, Lost, Lost*. Looking beyond the traditional documentary, Renov contemplates such nontraditional modes of autobiographical practice as the essay film, the video confession, and the personal Web page.

Michael Renov is professor of critical studies at the USC School of Cinema-Television. He is the editor of *Theorizing Documentary* and the coeditor of *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (Minnesota, 1996) and *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minnesota, 1999).



VISIBLE EVIDENCE SERIES
University of Minnesota Press

Printed in U.S.A.

Cover design by Jeanne Lee

Still from *Columbia Revolt* by Newsreel.

Photograph of Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill courtesy of Signifyin' Works.