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Camera movies: *Awesome, I Fuckin' Shot Them!*

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Abstract

This article analyses four recent documentaries that all involve the filmmaker handing multiple cameras over to their participant–subjects. In particular it investigates the different ways these films address themselves to the active audience in a contemporary participatory culture, what meaning they attribute to their subject-participants and what they tell us about the contemporary documentary filmmaker. The figure of the 'camera movie' is designed to capture the paradox inherent in the idea that when a filmmaker gives up control of the authorial camera neither the camera nor the filmmaker recede into the background, they simply take up a more central, and celebrated, place within a participatory culture.

Keywords

participatory culture
participatory documentary
ancillary texts
documentary authorship
active audiences
Iraq War

Introduction: the participatory ideal

What does it mean to make a participatory documentary in a contemporary participatory culture? To find out, this article examines four, 21st century participatory documentaries, looking especially at how they frame participation, how they address themselves to the active audience in a participatory culture, and how they make use of an expanded sphere of ancillary media texts to do both of those things.

All the films under review are feature-length American productions, and are participatory only in the narrow sense that they involve a filmmaker handing multiple cameras over to subjects who would otherwise be expected to play their role in front of the camera. Camera movies are not, in that sense, subject initiated, and therefore contrast with other participatory modes of filmmaking where activists, amateurs or other independent practitioners take up cameras of their own accord. This latter type of participatory filmmaking involves participating in the world through documentary practice, whereas camera movies involve participation in documentary practice at the express invitation of another.

You only have to look at the titles of the documentaries under investigation here to identify the extent to which the camera (and its proxies) has been accorded a quite particular significance. *The War Tapes* (Scranton, USA 2006) gives American soldiers in Iraq a turn behind the camera; *Voices of Iraq* (The People of Iraq, USA, 2004) claims there are many, many sides to that story; *Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!* (Hörnblowér, USA, 2006) gives 50 Beastie Boys fans a go, and *Chain Camera* (Dick, USA, 2001) boasts 'No Lights. No crew. No rules'.

Figure 1: Promotional poster for Ifilm movies. 'SAM WITH A MOVIE CAMERA'.

Camera movies are not simply documentary texts, but media campaigns. They are designed in advance to exploit what Martin Barker (2004) calls the 'ancillary' media of film culture, and to thereby generate a 'metaculture' of critical interest and creative activity (Greg Urban 2002; Mette Hjort 2004). These ancillary media and metacultural practices come together in the production and consumption of DVD extras, film-making manifestos, reviews, corporate tie-ins, interactive games, fan-ish and buff-ish participation – in short, all that talk. So while the authorial camera feigns to make way for the participatory camera in these films, nonetheless the director's ingenuity makes such a splash in the broader media sphere that there is little chance of the audience forgetting whose camera it really is. The figure of the 'camera movie' is designed to capture this paradox, and to suggest that a certain cultural, commercial and technological fetishism attends to those film practices that get framed as participatory. That is, although the participatory camera can be understood as a symbol of the democratization of media production, it also represents a pointed appeal to audiences known to be responsive to the extra-textual provocations and invitations of the contemporary media producer.

The camera movie's authorial trickery is not new of course. Thirty years ago Seth Feldman claimed that documentary had discovered its ideal before it even had a definition. Feldman (1977: 23) represents this ideal as one where 'the degree of truth (or, at least integrity) to be found in any one work is directly proportional to the amount of subject participation in its creation.' As a way of debunking this ideal Feldman (1977: 35) suggests that for those audiences who believed in it, 'information comes most readily through an identification with the benevolent forces which let the subject appear to make the film.' In other words, it is not the

participant–subject whose perspective frames the world for an audience, but the filmmaker's.

Although Feldman's essay is only three decades old, the films he discusses are older still, dating back to the Bantu Kinema Educational Experiment of 1935, which aimed to 'create a cinema produced by and for the peoples of East Africa' (Feldman 1977: 23). Hence the audiences and filmmakers he describes operate in a very different cultural context to contemporary audiences and filmmakers. Indeed it is the extent to which participatory culture *is* different that warrants our revisiting Feldman's critique. A participatory culture includes myriad examples of subject-generated and amateur media production and criticism. It propagates many more myths about participation, and exploits previously unseen technological developments to produce new expressive forms and forums. Consequently, one of the key tropes for my exploration of the relationship between the participatory documentary and a participatory culture is the idea that the documentary ideal, far from being consigned to history, may have morphed into a more pervasive 'participatory ideal', where media productions are valued for the simple fact that non-professionals participated in their making.

A fourth American moment

Paul Arthur's (1993) 'Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)' also provides a valuable point of reference for this article, providing as it does a historical account of the documentary and its relationship to an aesthetics and politics of authenticity. Looking at filmmaking that emerges roughly in the 1930s, 1960s and 1990s, Arthur discusses the way authenticity gets mapped onto different practices at different times, but also how different techniques develop in response to prevailing mores, political crises or even the film industry itself. Arthur (1993: 109) identifies the state-sponsored films known as New Deal documentaries of the 1930s as an authentic riposte to Hollywood fictions, for instance. Likewise, '[d]irect cinema and its theatrical offshoots emerged with the sovereignty of prime-time television, while the recent wave of documentary releases follows the precipitous rise of home video and cable TV and is contemporaneous with an onslaught of "reality-based" programming' (Arthur 1993: 109). Each of these responses and reactions can be read, according to Arthur, as an attempt to 'discover a truth untainted by institutional forms of rhetoric . . . [employing] . . . figures through which to signify the spontaneous, the anticonventional, the refusal of mediating process' (ibid). In its focus on participatory documentaries that revel in participatory culture's techno-spontaneity, and in its anti-institutional, anti-authorial processes, this essay might be read as investigating a fourth American documentary moment, and its attendant jargons of authenticity.

One of the questions that Arthur's essay prompts for the current investigation is the extent to which the authenticity of camera movies derives from their *adherence* to the prevailing wisdom, rather than their refusal of it. For instance, camera movies can certainly be seen as reactions *against* certain aspects of mainstream media production, including news broadcasting, 'embedded' war journalism and reality television, as well as

more conventionally authored documentaries. The two Iraq war films in particular are represented by their creators not as reactions against the war, but certainly as reactions against a 'media' incapable of adequately rendering it.

What camera movies do not do, by and large, is eschew the prevailing culture's desire for an authentic brand of media production; they simply seek to do it better. Witness the director of *The War Tapes*, Deborah Scranton (2006a), proclaiming that her film is an 'experiment in authenticity'. There is clearly a desire for something new being expressed in this reference to experiment, but the attachment to authenticity reveals it to be a formal tinkering at best, rather than an overhaul of documentary idealism. Indeed one can read Arthur as debunking the very idea of an overhaul when it comes to the documentary. In his conclusion he states that for better or worse, 'the quiddity of the form . . . will continue to pivot on historically specific legitimations of authenticity' (Arthur 1993: 134). In this sense, Arthur's American moments may simply be read, not as reactions against their time, but as a synthesis of their times and technologies, enacting 'historical and cultural assumptions about appropriate expressions of truth' (Arthur 1993: 133). For instance, Direct Cinema quickly inaugurates its own institutional rhetoric in its reliance on jargons of authenticity (transparency, the personal and particular, observation) to articulate its dissatisfaction with the world and with existing methods for representing it. Likewise, in the context of participatory culture, the participatory documentary makes much ado about an authentic mode of representation that is in fact culturally prescribed and economically sanctioned. The participatory documentary is not the proper expression of a participatory culture, it is only the most predictable.

Camera movie operators

Although camera movies seem patently of their time, what this article seeks to do is show exactly how they interface with a contemporary media culture, what meanings they derive from that relationship, and how they can shed new light on the relationship between those who participate in documentary practice, and those who participate in media practice more broadly. The number of cameras handed over in these films varies from 10 to 150, often with cameras being passed on to yet more participants, so that a film such as *Voices of Iraq* can ostensibly boast 'thousands' of points of view.

The sheer number of participants, cameras and video tapes involved in this form of filmmaking is part of what makes it a contemporary phenomenon. The availability of cheap, lightweight cameras is clearly central to the process, as are the digital technologies used to manage the vast archives of material being acquired, edited and transmitted. Furthermore, in the case of *The War Tapes*, the filmmaker, situated in the United States, used Instant Messaging to communicate with and instruct her citizen-soldier participant–subjects while they filmed their tour of duty in Iraq. But it may be less significant that the internet was used to direct soldiers on the other side of the world, than is the manner in which it was deployed to take advantage of new reception contexts and distribution practices. Like

many contemporary films, *The War Tapes* used the internet as a key platform in its dissemination and independent distribution. But it is the way that it writes its participatory credentials upon and through the ancillary texts of the contemporary media sphere that says as much about its relation to participatory culture, as does any deployment of a participant–subject behind the camera.

When a contemporary documentary filmmaker hands the camera over to participant–subjects we should recognize this as both a response to the culture and as a targeted appeal to audiences who expect to be engaged across multiple media formats in increasingly novel ways. It is by specifically targeting this kind of audience that the filmmakers in question strike their most authoritative, authorial pose. This is no less the case when these same authors are defined by their strategic exits from the pro-filmic scene. Or more to the point, it is their strategic exits that make these filmmakers the exemplary authors of the participatory realm, because it is the exit itself that reappears in the expanded sphere of ancillary film texts as a point of discussion and debate.

To reveal the way camera movies appeal to audiences, one has to map the relationship between the participant–subjects in the text, and those participants in the audience – bloggers, reviewers, festival audiences, amateur filmmakers, film fans – who respond. The former play the part of producers/filmmakers, and the latter play the part of informed and active consumers. But as Feldman would remind us, although audiences may identify with their participant cousins behind the camera, they are just as likely to respond to, and identify their role in, the director's benevolent, methodological provocation – a provocation that seems to address them directly. Conversely, the participant–subject might see something of themselves in the activities of the audience, while also having every reason to identify with the director who entrusts them with the camera. Hence the director is effectively the hinge that brings together participant–subjects and audience-participants, making him or her a veritable auteur of the participatory realm.

But so too, according to Barbara Klinger, is the filmmaker who knows how to exploit the potential of DVD-Video to the satisfaction of ever more demanding consumers. Writing about the particular address entailed in DVD extras, behind the scenes 'secrets' and special edition collector sets, Klinger (2006: 72) writes of the construction of an 'insider' status for film consumers that parallels the way that the camera movie director addresses their audience-participants. In both cases this 'insider' is an insider because they participate in — and demand — a certain kind of knowledge economy where consumer expertise is rewarded with a sense of belonging and an opportunity for identification. It is the ability of a filmmaker to satisfy this growing expectation for participation and identification — whether through methodological novelty in DVD authorship, or by handing out fifty video cameras — that makes them auteurs of a participatory culture in particular: that is, masters of a discourse that stimulates and flatters the audience, while simultaneously ensuring the ongoing primacy of their own role in that process. But just as there are two kinds of participant, there are two kinds of insider.

The unproblematic subject

In their desire to innovate and excite, camera movie directors do sometimes over-reach. They might claim, for instance, a greater *novelty* for their approach than is due; a *righteousness* about handing the camera over that can be self-serving; and most problematically of all, by claiming an *immediacy* of method that looks contemporary in its technological, cultural, and aesthetic manifestations, but can end up positively retrograde in its reclamation of authenticity and documentary truth. And central to this reclamation of documentary truth is not simply a celebration of the participant–subject (and hence, the documentary ideal) but a reclamation of the subject itself.

Having accepted the limits of the 'objective' documentary mode, filmmakers have long pursued a variety of explicitly subjective documentary modalities, and exposed the mechanics of authorship in the process. But as Michael Renov's (2004) work in this area demonstrates, it was not only the author that was exposed by these new documentary practices, the subject itself was shown to be contingent, hybrid and unreliable. Yet turning a blind eye to this history, not only do camera movies tend to claim for themselves an even-handed objectivity, they use a subjective point of view to achieve it, and produce an ostensibly coherent (uncomplicated) subject in the process. The key to this coherent subject is their status as 'insiders' who occupy a world only they can know — an idea inherent in the decision to hand the camera over. What is also inherent in this idea is that if it is impossible for 'us' to know 'their' world, we also cannot know them. In other words we cannot discern any contradictions or inconsistencies in them as subjects.

This insider subject differs qualitatively from those audience-participants described by Klinger who exist inside a participatory culture, and who are 'in the know' with respect to an authorial address that bestows upon them a sense of expertise and recognition, and a relatively complex subjectivity. Unlike participant–subjects then, who are typically valued because they belong to *another* culture, the participants in the audience are valued because they belong to the *same* culture as the filmmaker. Of course this is a conclusion that is well rehearsed throughout the history of ethnographic and documentary filmmaking, but it is one that remains productive here given the need to distinguish between the different kinds of participants involved in the production and reception of camera movies, and the different places they might occupy in a contemporary participatory culture. Indeed it is the participant–insiders more closely aligned with the *reception* of camera movies, rather than their production, who enjoy the greater agency and more complex subjectivity in a participatory culture.

Extras – read all about it

In camera movies, a director deploys participation as a strategy, and thereby frames both that participation and its outputs. Furthermore, what filmmakers and subjects say about their participation in meta-textual forums constitutes a big part of what audiences consume, and contributes greatly to the way audiences' identifications are formed. Beyond the structural tensions inherent in the relation between filmmaker and participant–subject, these agents may come from very different socio-cultural

backgrounds, or simply hold antagonistic points of view on matters being represented. Insofar as camera movies are voiced by many, therefore, but fall short of achieving what David MacDougall (1998: 121) calls a 'genuinely polythetic' voice, it is in the ancillary textual sphere that some of these tensions might be explored.

The role played by the director in camera movies is almost invariably the first topic of conversation in reviews of such films. The director of *Chain Camera* (2001), Kirby Dick, describes in DVD extras of having to defend his director credit against critics who claimed he could not be the director if he was not present during filming. Conversely, the producers of *Voices of Iraq* (2004) chose to credit 'The People of Iraq' for the direction of that film, while Deborah Scranton (Currey 2006) says of *The War Tapes*: 'I didn't want my ideas intruding. If I were in-theatre, I'd be the "director," shaping the story, even if unconsciously.' Although the notion of the absent director may be a fallacy, one of the reasons it persists in discussions of camera movies is that it chimes so perfectly with our fantasies and hopes for a more democratic media sphere.

Chain Camera stands apart in this discussion because it contains no professional footage and is made up of video diaries strung end to end. The film involves ten students in a Los Angeles high school being given their own Hi 8 video cameras with which to film themselves for a week, before passing the cameras onto ten more students, and so on for a year. According to the producers, 4192 students took part. Only 16 students are featured in the documentary, however, with each being allotted about six minutes of screen time. Because of the video diary format and the age of the participants, there are hints of exploitation about the film, such as when a student films his drunken mother apparently passed out on the bed. Some scenes show students taking drugs or discussing race, while another scene features a male and female student conducting a mock, oral sex exhibition with a banana. If *Chain Camera* occasionally challenges its audience with its representation of teenagers, its participatory methodology makes further demands still.

Kirby Dick and the producer of *Chain Camera,* Eddie Schmidt, provide commentary on the DVD, offering background information about the film censors who deemed it unacceptable that the banana should enter the woman's mouth in the mock sex scene described above. The filmmakers can also be heard responding to the criticism that certain students revealed themselves in the film to hold racist views. Dick argues that discussion of race is not only inevitable in a high school where students come from forty-one different ethnic backgrounds, but that discussion of racial stereotypes represents a much less racist approach than does that of the person who cannot admit their own racism. Dick thereby uses the DVD extras to expand upon the context in which the student's views should be understood, while also offering a relatively authoritative, adult voice that is necessarily absent from the film.

On four occasions in the DVD's extras, students join in the commentary about their particular scenes, from which we learn, among other things, that some went to Sundance for the film's premiere. If there is a tendency to see participant–subjects as text-bound, their appearance on DVD extras

and at festival screenings suggests otherwise. In this case the participant–subject is not only an insider-witness to their own culture, they are granted a more fulsome look at what it is like to be inside a filmmaking culture as well. So by treating their participant–subjects as agents in the expanded textual sphere, the filmmakers enable them to become a more likely site of identification for audiences as well.

It should not be understood from this brief description of *Chain Camera* that I am arguing that directors might simply undo exploitation on the big screen through the careful manipulation of extras accompanying a DVD. But where a director hands the camera over, and thereby deliberately skews the means by which their personal view of the world might be articulated – and where a methodology is employed that gives subjects enough rope to hang themselves – it is important to take into account the full range of media that the contemporary documentarian is utilizing to get their message across. This is especially the case when those media are also made available to subject–participants for further elaboration of, and reflection upon, their previous participation.

Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!

In *Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!*, subject participation begins and ends with the capturing of raw footage that is then handed over to a director-editor-producer team. This film of a Beastie Boys concert involved giving Hi 8 video cameras to 50 fans to shoot their particular view of the concert, before handing the cameras back at the end of the show. The resulting film is a collage-like concert documentary described as 'an authorized bootleg', further augmented with some professionally recorded footage. In this case not only are the participants quite restricted in terms of their input, they are also not the film's subjects – the band is. However, the film is nonetheless a highly visible example of a desire to hand the camera over, and it is this quality, more than any other, that has been the focus of its promotion and reception. Furthermore, it is precisely because of this extreme 'camera visibility' that the very question of who the subject of the documentary is becomes unstable.

As the film's title states, 'I' shot that. So not only does this suggest that the film is partly about who shot it, it is also about the fan that *proclaims* they shot it. In other words, *Awesome* anticipates and produces a life for itself beyond the cinema, by invoking the ongoing investment of fans who will mimic the film's titular declaration by proclaiming that they, or someone like them, did indeed shoot the film, before debating what this means for fans, and documentary filmmaking generally. Indeed, the director, Nathaniel Hörnblowér (a.k.a band member Adam Yauch) states that the idea for The Beastie Boys film came from a fan's camera phone movie recorded at a gig and posted on the band's website. In this case it is not just that the participant–subject is asked to embody a point of view that is framed in turn by a benevolent filmmaker, the participant fan actually frames the whole enterprise in advance (Fig. 2).

The promotional poster[1] for the film further bears out this relationship between band and fans, featuring as it does a *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) themed universe where the band wield light sabres, and spaceships take

1 See the image online at http://www.oscilloscope.net/images/BB-WEB-Space-Poster.jpg.

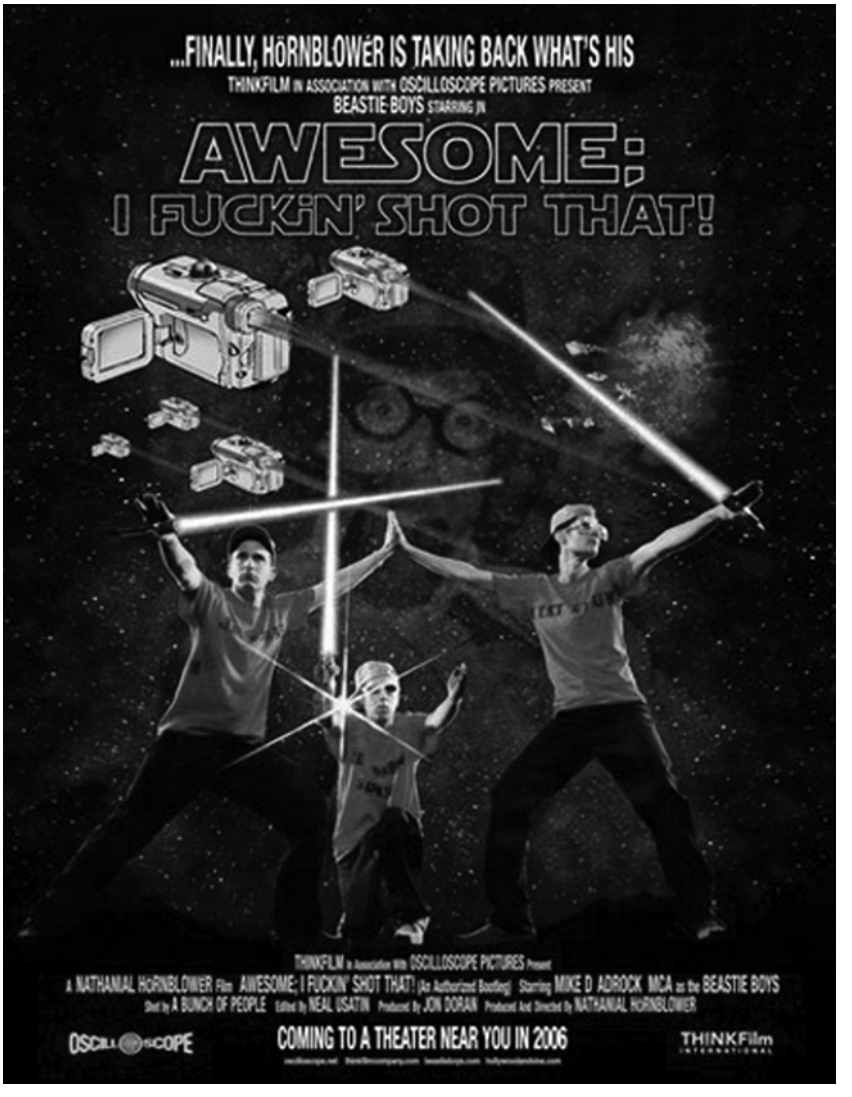

Figure 2: Promotional poster for Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!

the form of video cameras. The beauty of this image lies in the way that it sets up the band as the stars of their film, while invoking in the process an image of *Star Wars* fandom married to the participatory camera and fan re-enactment. In other words, the band members are simultaneously represented as stars and fans, and the poster suggests that like the *Star Wars* films, The Beastie Boys must make way for the indomitable cultural force of the fan universe. In the expanded universe of *Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!*, fan culture is represented as productive and pre-emptive, rather than simply reactionary, and it is fan *culture* that joins the band on the metaphorical stage, not simply fan subjects. This is a film that lets you know its participants were participants all along, and were not made so through the benevolent decision to hand the camera over.

Another quality that stands out about the *Awesome* universe is its self-reflexivity. For example, the film poster declares: 'Finally Hörnblowér is taking back what's his.' This reference to reclaiming the video cameras handed out to fans contains a subtle unmasking of the paternalism that so easily befalls the camera movie director. Not only does it admit that the cameras belonged to the director all along, it performs a mock cynicism that the other camera movies dare not. Of course this is a film with much less at stake than the war films to be discussed below, which partly explains the freedom it evidently enjoys. Nonetheless its self-reflexivity means that it offers a valuable commentary on the power and politics of camera movies, and highlights a lack of self-awareness in similar discussions surrounding *The War Tapes*, or *Voices of Iraq*. Unlike those texts, the *Awesome* universe eschews opportunities to festishize its own benevolence; it more openly acknowledges the benefits that accrue to the person handing the camera over (who also takes it back); and it uses ancillary texts to promote a vision of cultural production as a process of endless borrowing and exchange between fans and media producers.

War and the first-person shooter

Deborah Scranton's award winning film[2], *The War Tapes*, is a documentary in which five US National Guard soldiers record their twelve-month tour of duty in Iraq. This footage is cut with professionally recorded interviews conducted back home with family members, and with the soldiers upon their return. Scranton (2006c) claims that the film has an 'unseen collaborator' in the form of 'the internet'. An advocate of citizen journalism, she also alerts us to:

> the intimate power of the internet exploding on the movie screen. Without instant messaging, the soldiers could never have become filmmakers – without email and cheap video, they soldiers [sic] could never have told their stories as they happened.
>
> (Scranton 2006c)

Certainly modern telecommunications technologies were crucial to Scranton's ability to direct from the United States a film shot by soldiers in Iraq. But more importantly, by tapping into a community of soldiers and military bloggers, their families and friends, and a public in need of a narrative about the war they could be proud of, Scranton has produced a 'War Tapes' web site (www.thewartapes.com) that is large, triumphant, community minded, and a testament to just how embedded in media culture a cinematic text can become in a very short time. What a website like this also enables is a certain amount of myth making, not unlike that used to frame audiences' readings of *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999) or *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves 2008), both of which construct explicit relationships between the ostensibly real worlds of their characters and the online forums employed to give audiences a way into those worlds. In the case of *The War Tapes*, the website allowed for word of the film to spread; for preferred readings of the film to gather steam and congeal into conventional wisdom; and for an independent voice to emerge

2 Best Documentary, Tribecca Film Festival, 2006. Best International Documentary at the 2006 BritDoc Festival.

that could claim to be free of bias from 'the media'. As Zac Bazzi, one of the camera-carrying soldiers writes in a blog entry on the site:

> this started as a grassroots movie (a few thousand dollars and 10 cameras) and its [sic] going to be distributed as a grassroots movie – because of you. If you can blogroll us or link to us, if you can send out a few of the clips from our site to a friend, that's how we're going to be distributed, through word of mouth. Thank you.
>
> Posted on May 7, 2006 07:40 AM by Z (Bazzi 2006)

Although Scranton chose to distribute *The War Tapes* through 'word of mouth', this too can be seen as a way of tapping into the zeitgeist, less an obstacle to be overcome, than a call to arms that says the people themselves can make and distribute movies. In this respect it also recalls the distribution approach employed by Robert Greenwald, producer and director of documentaries such as *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005) and *Iraq For Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006). Greenwald's approach to distribution, discussed in an interview entitled 'Documentary as Political Activism' (Haynes and Littler 2007), involves connecting with established community, church and protest groups as a way of promoting the sort of change the film argues for. In the process, of course, it also functions as a way of getting the film out to the biggest audience possible. Greenwald (in Haynes and Littler 2007: 26) suggests that his interest in this type of distribution came about because he wanted to get his films out quickly in order that the problems they addressed could likewise be tackled in a 'timely' manner, something traditional distribution approaches do not allow for.

Online groups and communities provide documentary filmmakers – but especially filmmakers advocating a participatory ethos – with new distribution channels and new ways of framing a film's function. When they exploit these opportunities, and the internet in general, filmmakers give the audience a role to perform (debate and dissemination), and extend the role of participant–subjects, like Zac Bazzi, into the ancillary sphere. In the case of activist filmmaking, the filmmaker, the target audience, and on-screen participants act as one in a common cause. In *The War Tapes* there is also a distinct sense of the activist mentality at work, although neither the film nor the soldiers argue for an end to the war as such.[3] There are certainly no pleas to the government, or appeals to the audience to fight for change. What the film and the soldiers do advocate is the importance of the soldier's point of view, claming that it is more truthful and more authentic than any that has come before. This in turn gets picked up by journalists such as Tobi Elkin (2006) who writes: '[f]orget about embedding journalists in Iraq or other war zones—a soldier's truth is infinitely more real and compelling.'

In camera movies there is sometimes a tendency to overstate the level of a subject's participation, as happens most explicitly in the case of the director credit for *Voices of Iraq* (The People of Iraq, 2004). As Joshua Land (2004) writes, 'any film that credits itself as "filmed and directed by the people of Iraq" deserves to be regarded with skepticism.' In a similar vein we might regard with suspicion the previously cited claim by Deborah

3 Zac Bazzi says at one point in the film: 'Let's just leave it alone and leave. Fuck the oil, man. Fuck that. Not worth it. I'll walk everywhere in the US.' This can be viewed online at: http://www.thewartapes.com/2006/03/asscrack.shtml.

Scranton (2006a) that *The War Tapes* is an 'experiment in authenticity'. For when she says so, neither Scranton nor her film conveys any sense of experiment as an unmasking or debunking of authenticity, but rather, as a way of uncovering new and convincing techniques for creating it.

One such technique employed by the soldiers in *The War Tapes* involves taking their cameras into battle and attaching them to their vehicles, guns and helmets. On the one hand this does produce a visceral and alarming sense of being there, but on the other hand it also evokes the familiar first-person shooter perspective of video games and disturbingly blurs two meanings of the phrase 'I Fuckin' Shot That!' In this case, the people who are shot not only die, but they are also filmed being eaten by dogs. And although these images are apparently the only ones censored by the army, their content is nonetheless narrated in a to-camera piece by the soldier who shot the footage. The story thereby becomes one about censorship (what I shot), rather than violence (who I shot). In the process, it rather too neatly offers its own jargon of authenticity as a riposte to political correctness and cultural sensitivities.

Views of conflict

Even if one were to grant that a contemporary director might treat the limitations of the camera movie with care, and refrain from claiming too much in its name, there is still the matter of what it means to empower one participant–subject over another. As Jay Ruby (1991: 53) points out, 'it should not be assumed that any one group has a privileged insight into its own history . . . No particular group of people has the corner on being self-serving or adjusting the past to fit the needs of the present.' Likewise, no single group of people to whom you might give a camera is beyond telling a story that suits you, or them . . . but not another.

When watching *The War Tapes* one might ask why the Iraqis do not have cameras for instance. Which is where *Voices of Iraq*, with its 150 cameras and 2000 points of view comes in, showing us what Iraq looks like from the perspective of those who live there. But as if to prove Ruby's point all over again, the extraordinary thing about *Voices of Iraq* is that it has much the same ideological impact as *The War Tapes*. That is, both films encourage identification with their participant–subjects through their deployment of the participant camera, and both films represent their subjects as victims of the same war; a war which, on the whole, they either welcome as a necessary step towards peace and prosperity, or accept as an inevitability.

After watching these films together then, one resorts to asking: 'but where is the conflict?' This is not meant to belittle the suffering of either party, which is evident enough, but is intended to draw attention to the way these films hold up the apolitical, individual story, not only as a possibility in a time of war, but as an ideal. As a result, audiences of *The War Tapes* are confronted with sentiments such as those of the camera carrying soldier, Michael Moriarty, who says to camera:

> so let's all stop crying about whether we had reason to go in there or not because we can fight about that forever. It's a done deal. We're in Iraq. Support what it takes to make this thing work, or shut-up!

For a (hyper)text that purports to embody the participatory ethos of the internet, to promote citizen journalism, and give a voice to the voiceless, it is fortuitous that *The War Tapes* can produce a voice to say what it really wants to say: support this war or shut up. In as much as *The War Tapes* is about the right of soldiers to be heard, it very clearly asks its participants in the audience to confine their own engagement to promotional rather than critical activities. It also reveals that when the benevolent filmmaker gives a voice to one, she silences another.

The festival scene and the case of the saluting soldier

The myth-making potential of camera movies is commensurate with the range of forums they exploit and the integrated nature of their message. What I want to discuss here is a spectacular example of concerted myth-making conducted wholly in the ancillary sphere, in order to show how the ostensibly unmediated visions of participant–subjects are framed, and framed again, to do ideological and promotional work.

To set the scene, consider how the director of *The War Tapes* has described herself and her background. In one interview Scranton (2006b) says 'I'm not a liberal', and on the film's official website she (2006c) says she 'has a journalism background and a passion for the infantry (her last documentary was about WWII vets)'. These read as reliable, unsurprising and frank descriptions that help the audience to situate the director in relation to the world depicted in the film. But other statements seem less reliable. Keeping in mind that Scranton's CV (2006d), also posted on the film's official website, boasts a degree in semiotics from Brown University, consider what could well be her own rendering of the myth of the black saluting soldier on the cover of Paris-Match,[4] as famously discussed by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972). In Barthes's (1972: 116) analysis of that image he reveals that while the image explicitly propagandizes for the French military, it ultimately functions in an undeclared way as propaganda for a white colonial institution whose benevolence and honour is recorded in the evident gratitude of its black subjects.

Scranton does something similar when she describes a scene at the 2006 Tribecca film festival:

> At the very end, came one moment that will forever be etched in my memory (and I'm sure everyone else's who was there). In fact, it came after the end – after Mike Pride had closed the questioning and the final applause had died away. People began to stand up and talk among themselves, then just as the crowd's chatter swelled, it paused and diminished to quiet again as a very powerfully built man with short hair came to the microphone in the right hand aisle. The entire crowd hushed all the way down to silence. Everyone was still, all eyes in the room looked at him. The man identified himself only as a Marine and explained that Marines don't follow the same rules as everyone else. The Marine said he had only one thing to say to the soldiers on stage and he stood to attention, and drew his right hand to his brow in a salute. After holding the salute for what seemed an eternity, he crisply turned and walked back up the aisle and melted into the crowd. I went to look for him, but he was gone.
>
> (Scranton 2006e)

4 See the image online at http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/art/saulte.jpg.

Camera movies readily fall into colonialist traps. There is no shaking the sense that they ultimately seek to capture an insider's view of 'their' world that will be seen as less mediated by, and from the perspective of, 'our' outside world. In their claims of immediacy, they deny their function as the initial expression of a myth, and by letting the insider speak they naturalize both them and us. The marine at Tribecca represents himself as one who speaks a language peculiar to marines, which not only frees us from the burden of understanding him, but also deters us from enquiring further about what he does mean, let alone what Scranton means in re-presenting him. But his speech, though ostensibly directed at other marines, nonetheless constitutes a performative and mythmaking address to the festival audience, thereby mirroring the address of the soldiers on film. For they too know themselves to be addressing two audiences: other military personnel who evidently will not talk, and a civilian audience that cannot possibly grasp the lives they are being shown and who should therefore remain silent.

What Scranton appears to be so taken by here is the idea that her filmmaking methodology not only fostered a dialogue between marines that would not have happened otherwise, but also that this performative salute is the ultimate vindication of her methodology, proving as it does that marines think different, *The War Tapes* knows it, and now crucially, so do we. Although Scranton would have us believe that the information she portrays in her anecdote comes naturally from her festival participant, nonetheless she is the wilful disseminator of a second, or third-order, myth. By posting this information online Scranton also fixes it, with much rhetorical flair, as 'pure information', even though among the myths being propagated is one that reveals her as the agent who gives a voice to the voiceless, and another that casts US marines as the voiceless among us.

It would be wrong to suggest that this festival scene can simply be mapped onto the filmic text, as though both texts put forward the same myths in the same way. Certainly the soldiers in *The War Tapes* are at turns engaging, funny and surprisingly self-reflexive; and in common parlance they debunk the odd myth. But in fact the Arabic speaking, Lebanese born soldier Zac Bazzi, the most articulate of the film's participants, is a veritable coup for the film insofar as he substantiates the myth of the US military's moral superiority and ethnic diversity, much as the black French soldier could be understood as a celebration of the benefits of French colonialism. Bazzi also provides a crucial site of identification for the civilian audience, in a way that the other soldiers do not – something his numerous media appearances would attest to.

Of course while soldiers like Bazzi may narrate their war experiences with self-consciousness and insight, they also function as part of an imperialist occupying force, doing the ideological work of a benevolent director who is in the employ of The New Hampshire National Guard. Each of these institutional frameworks, it scarcely needs to be said, adds another mediating layer to the film's narrative world in a way that gives the lie to the film's self-proclaimed spontaneity, and the anti-institutional and anti-authorial jargon that accompanies it. In her representation of *The War Tapes* Scranton wilfully devolves as a critical subject herself, winding the clock

back to a simpler time, before her college semiotics classes, when a saluting soldier and an illiberal filmmaker could simply be taken at face value.

5 http://thewartapes.com/trailer/.

Conclusion

Puffed up with a belief in their own immediacy, both *Voices of Iraq* and *The War Tapes* take aim at 'the media' who invariably get it wrong. Having said that it is curious to see just how prominently *Voices of Iraq* features an authorial voice – in the form of intertitles – that narrativizes the film's own project. For instance, in a scene where a military vehicle is blown up, we watch and wait as the vehicle burns, while titles announce:

> TITLE: 'After the car bombing, protesters wait for journalists to arrive with their armored escorts.'
> Protesters start throwing rocks at burning humvee.
> TITLE: 'As soon as the media leave the protesters disband.'

The story being told here is the one about the media influencing the scene they are trying to record. Yet because there is still a camera present to record the moment when the rock throwing stops, this participatory camera proves itself to *not* be a part of the media apparatus that motivates the dissenters into action in the first place. In this case, although there appears to be a sensitivity to the mediating impact of cameras being conveyed, clearly it is a narrative restricted in its scope, and one that does not extend to reflecting on the impact of the cameras used in the documentary itself.

A scene with similar implications is shown early on in *The War Tapes*, as well as being included in the downloadable trailer.[5]

> TITLE: 'BARRACKS: PREPARING TO DEPLOY TO IRAQ'
> Soldier 1 points his video camera at soldier 2
> Soldier 2: 'I'm not supposed to talk to the media'.
> Soldier 1: 'I'm not the media dammit!'

What does soldier 2 know that soldier 1 does not? That by the time the film, the festival audience, the citizen-journalists and the citizen-soldiers have done their job, they will indeed cohere into an example of the contemporary media text, complete with institutional trimmings and a culturally sanctioned rhetoric that warrants all the critical attention accorded its predecessors.

The four films discussed in this article fall into two groups. *Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!* and *Chain Camera* imagine their participants as members of a participatory culture, and thereby situate themselves as texts intersecting a vast, mediated, meta-textual sphere. The two war movies, by contrast, contrive to exploit the visibility and legitimacy of the insider participant–subject in a way that aims at a kind of diegetic truth, but which denies full expression to the kind of audience participation that might offer a more contested view of that truth.

Of course the participant–subject who sees himself or herself as a kind of activist, or an advocate for a voiceless group, is unlikely to be pleased by the kind of criticism that we might associate with healthy debate, simply

because they are called upon to embody that which is under review. This is a key drawback of the war documentaries in particular, which stand for dialogue and democracy, and exploit the ever-expanding media sphere, but ultimately are forced to choose between the principle of participation and their participant–subjects (Support these participant soldiers, who 'don't follow the same rules as everyone else', or shut up!). But if the audience is to be treated as more than a simple observer, and more than a cog in the promotional machine, they must be free to challenge the image of participation they are being sold – an image that often includes and flatters them. As a reflection both of and upon participatory culture, camera movies focus our attention not just on the fact of participation, but on its representation and take-up within their expansive frames. It is the way these documentary campaigns condition our reading of the filmic text that tells us most about the value they place on participation, and about the role they envisage for the audience in a participatory culture.

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