Mapping Nichols' Modes in Documentary Film: Helvetica and Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry

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Abstract

Documentary films may set out to be objective but most end up advocating a point of view. This seems to be true even of films attempting to follow a cinéma vérité style. The approach may be subtle and well-meaning as in the films of National Geographic, or openly confrontative as in the films of provocateur Michael Moore but most films fall somewhere along this spectrum.

Documentary films may present facts akin to describing a scientific experiment (Spurlock's *Supersize Me*, 2004) or a social science ethnographic presentation (Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006) or they may follow a literary narrative pattern, involving characters, plot, problem and solution (Kahn's *My Architect*, 2003). Sometimes the documentary develops into a narrative of its own (Psihoyos' *The Cove*, 2009). Documentary films tell important stories which are a fundamental cognitive strategy through which humans process knowledge and learn (Sachs, 2012).

In deconstructing documentary films, the theoretical model of modes suggested by Nichols (2010) is used to analyze the structure of two recent films: *Helvetica* (Hustwit, 2007) and *Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry* (Klayman, 2012) and is discussed in terms of its relevance for filmmakers and film critics.

Keywords: documentary film, Nichols, Helvetica, Ai Wei Wei

"My road is towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I decipher in a new way the world unknown to you."

Dziga Vertov,
Pioneering Soviet documentary filmmaker

"Deconstructing" Documentary Films

Documentary films may set out to be objective but most end up advocating a point of view (Fox 2011, Taibbi, 2013). This seems to be true even of films attempting to follow a cinéma vérité style. The approach may be subtle and well-meaning as in the films of National Geographic, or openly confrontative as in the films of provocateur Michael Moore but most films fall somewhere along this spectrum.

As with feature films, documentary films have a story to tell. Whereas feature films may make no claim for their narrative to be real, documentary films try to claim that the story they tell is real. But in order for the story to be credible it needs to be clarified to a recognizable narrative structure. Walter Fisher (1989) summarizes all communication as a form of storytelling. His Narrative Paradigm argues that people are essentially storytelling animals and reason is best propounded through stories. There is a universality in narrative; the Aristotelian tradition summarizes a narrative as being characters facing a problem and their efforts to reach a solution to the problem (Figure 1).
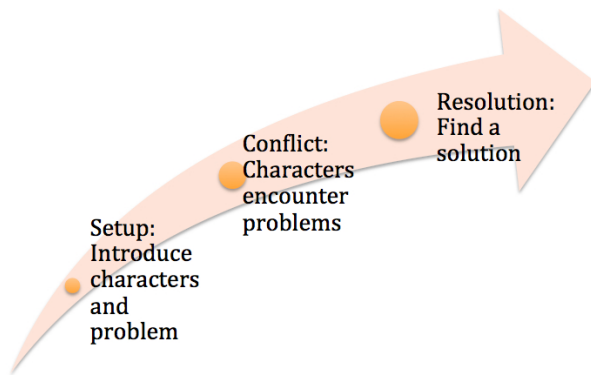

Figure 1: The Narrative Trajectory

"Yuki Onna," a Japanese folk tale, illustrates the components of the simple narrative trajectory.
In a snowy forest a young man gets lost. A snow woman (Yuki Onna) gives him shelter. She tells him not to speak of their affair to anyone. Later he marries a beautiful woman. They have a family. One day he tells his wife about his affair with the snow woman. She says, "That was me. I should kill you. But you need to look after our children so I'm leaving you forever".

Setup: - A snow woman gives shelter to a man who is lost.
Conflict: Most Yuki Onnas have to kill whomever they meet.
Resolution - There's a problem. She has to kill her husband but she leaves in order to solve their dilemma.
Moral – It is best to keep some secrets.

Helvetica **Story**

The documentary film *Helvetica* has an intriguing narrative structure. The film is a history of the typeface Helvetica since the 1950s. The director's vision colors the storytelling through interviews with graphic and type designers associated with the development of the typeface since the 1950s. There seem to have been few challenges to its rise as the dominant contemporary typeface seen everywhere today. However, dramatic tension in the film, corresponding to conflict in the narrative trajectory, lies in the strongly expressed opposing views of those on the one hand who see Helvetica as a clean elegant type which can be used anywhere, while others see it as a bland and banal default font. The winner is the Helvetica font itself; it is found nowadays in all countries.

Setup: - The question of why the font Helvetica is so ubiquitous is shown through a kaleidoscope of images and interviews.
Conflict: Differing strong viewpoints on the aesthetics of Helvetica are introduced through interviewees.
Resolution – The global spread of the font is testimony to its simple design.
Moral – Keep it simple.

Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry Story

The documentary film *Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry* is a striking portrayal of the artistry and social activism of contemporary Chinese superstar-provocateur, Ai Wei Wei. The narrative draws you into the fascinating world of a very complex creative spirit who openly defies Chinese authorities, organizes social activist campaigns and creates large-scale art installations including his 2010 "Sunflower Seeds" at London's Tate Modern. The film's director Alison Klayman also touches upon the notion that he is also a paradox. Ai Wei Wei's life and ideals are in a constant state of flux as evidenced by his active condemnation of the bird's nest" stadium, the Olympic facility which he personally helped to design because residents in the area of the stadium had been displaced. At the same time, grappling with his heritage as the son of the politically controversial poet Ai Qing, brings out his sentimental side, too.
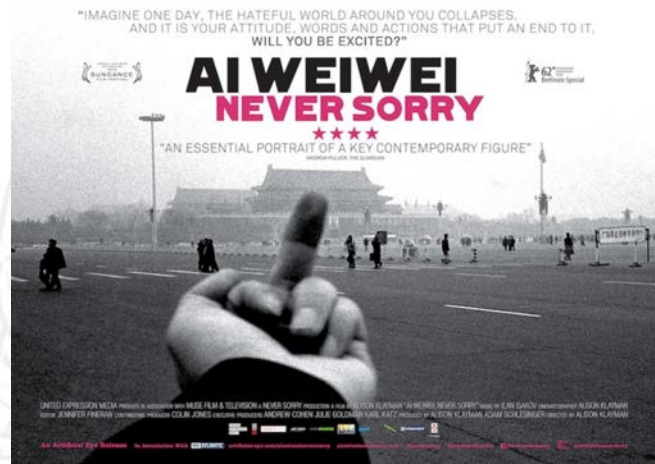
Setup: 2008 Chengdu earthquake elevates Ai Wei Wei's activism
Conflict: Ai We Wei's social activism campaigns upset Chinese authorities and they attempt to silence him
Resolution – His international standing protects him from excessive Chinese authority retribution
Moral – "Out of 40 cats one knows how to open the door" Meaning: Only a few people have the courage and ingenuity to become social activists.

These two films demonstrate three key points made by Jonah Sachs (2012) in the power of narrative to tell stories which are a fundamental cognitive strategy through which humans process knowledge and learn: identifying the audience, teaching values and exemplify a moral to the story.

Research Question and Methodology

The approach to the study was driven by the following two inquiry questions:
Do major documentary filmmakers have a theoretical approach to making a documentary film? Do major film reviewers such as Roger Ebert, Pauline Kael or Joe Morgenstern, have a theoretical approach to analyzing films?

This gave rise to the following research question: What is the most appropriate model for deconstructing documentary films in order to evaluate documentary film structure and design for filmmakers and film critics?

The term deconstruction in this study refers to a method critically analyzing films to reveal the inner components and working of the film to explain the underlying intentions of the filmmaker, and as an aid to criticizing the film. In this sense the term "deconstruction" is not being used in a Derridean sense, rather it is being used simply to mean an approach to analysis.

An overview of several recent film theoretical models reveals the difficulty of finding an appropriate model for deconstructing documentary films. Michael Renov's four tendencies of documentary (record, persuade, analyze or express) are not easily adaptable because they are too generalized and simplistic (Renov, 1993). Four documentary traditions are the focus of Paul Rotha's model (naturalist, realist, news-reel and propagandist traditions), which offers more detailed categorical distinctions than Renov's model.

The most comprehensive mapping of documentary films, however, has been created by the American film scholar, Bill Nichols. Among Nichols six modes of documentaries (Figure 2) there are a few similarities with Rotha's traditions. The realist tradition, for example is somewhat akin to Nichols' poetic mode; the news-reel tradition shares similar traits with Nichols' observational mode and the propagandist tradition fits easily into Nichols' description of expository mode. Nichols' departure from Rotha's model lies in his detailed mapping of each mode "in cinematic terms" in order to uncover the filmmaker's distinct voice as well as the film's overall framework (Nichols 2010). Nichols admits that each documentary film does not necessarily fall into one mode but can consist of a combination of modes. At the same time the fluidity of the modes leaves room for a variety of interpretations and possible structures for documentary filmmaking as this artistic craft continues to evolve in the future.
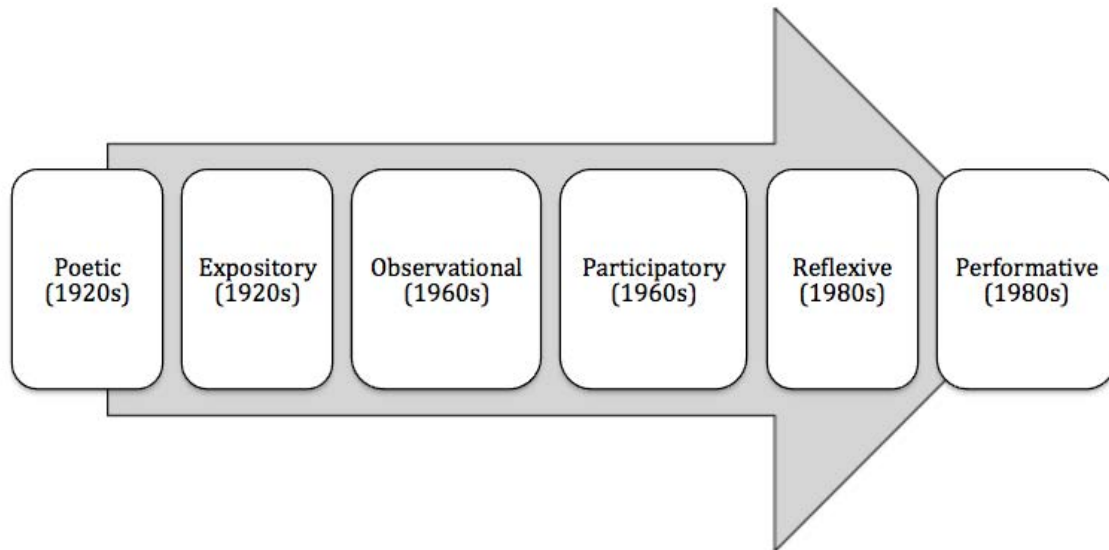
Figure 2: Nichols' Six Modes of Documentary

The following is a definition of each of the six Bill Nichols' Modes of Documentary Film:

Poetic (1920s)
Stresses visual and acoustic rhythms, patterns and the overall form of the film
Rain

Expository (1920s)
Speaks directly to viewer with voice over
An Inconvenient Truth, Super Size Me

Observational (1960s)
Looks on as social actors go about their lives as if the camera were not present
Wedding Camels

Participatory (1960s)
Filmmaker interacts with social actors, participates in shaping what happens before the camera (interviews are a prime example)
The Fog of War, Frost Nixon

Reflexive (1980s)
Calls attention to the conventions of documentary filmmaking and sometimes of methodologies such as fieldwork or the interviews
Stranger with a Camera

Performative (1980s)
Emphasizes the expressive quality of the filmmaker's engagement with the film's subject; addresses the audience in a vivid way
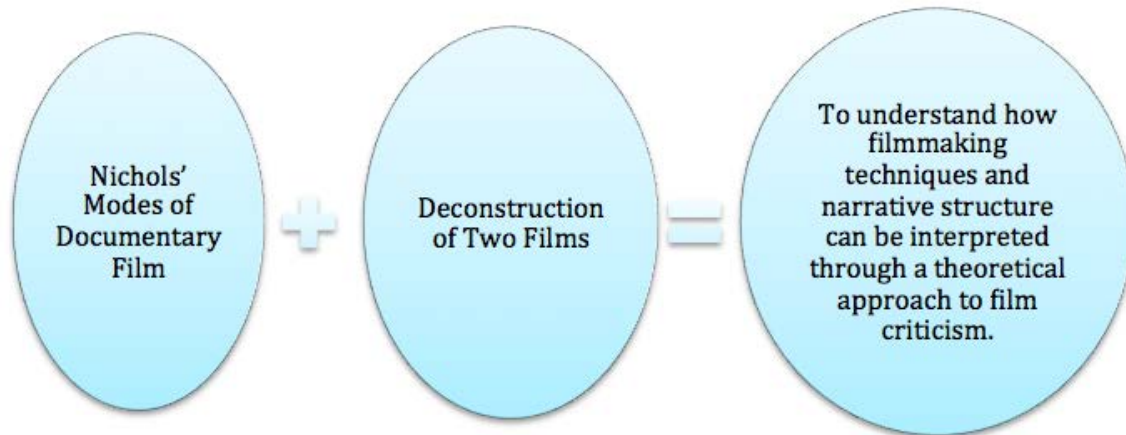Chile, Obstinate Memory

Figure 3: Methodology of the Study

Data

The two films chosen to test Nichols' mode taxonomy analysis were Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica* (2007) which received a critics' rating of 89% on the film criticism aggregator rottentomatoes.com, and Alison Klayman's *Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry* (2012) which received a critics' rating of 97% on the film criticism aggregator rottentomatoes.com.

Analysis of *Helvetica*

Tables 1 to 4 present examples of Nichols' modes of Poetic, Expository, Observational and Participatory Modes to analyze Hustwit's *Helvetica.*

Instances of the Poetic Mode are listed in Table 1. For the most part these are short fragments, still shots, sound bites from interviews, snatches of music, intercut shots, tinting of the image and framing of the shot. All these devices could be seen as the director seeking to "aesthetisize" the opening to make it seem as if the font Helvetica has origins in an atelier rather than a printing house.

Helvetica: Poetic Mode Categories	Examples
Editing: Rhythm	Cut to office slows rhythm (1/03:16) Style: 2 – 3 min. interviews; 45sec. street scenes (Chap 4)
Editing: Continuity	Vignelli's interview – non continuous (2/00:00 – 02:00)

Series of fragments	Montages: Typesetting by typesetter (1/00:26) Series of book covers (3/00:51); Office interview to street scene – bicycle parking – Amsterdam (4/00:02)
Music mood	Music echoes mood of visuals, medium tempo (4/04:30)
Elements of memory	"The 1950's was an interesting period in the development of graphic design"(3/00:08)
Abrupt shift of time/space	Street scenes to office (2/00:39)
Use of historical footage	Stills: "It was in 1993 I bought my 1st computer (4/02:05) 1960 stills: Wim Crouwel (4/02:40)
Use of slow motion	Shot lingering 14th St/Broadway-Lafayette Signage - NY subway Street scenes to office (1/03:16)
Tinted image	Reflection of Helvetica signage in glass (4/04:30)
Framing of the Shot	Helvetica typeface, partial section on street signage (4/04:23)

Table 1: Sample scenes in Helvetica identified as Poetic Mode Categories

In Table 2 the purpose of the film is taken up directly. The object is to inform and lay out the story so images become somewhat more extended and deepened in comparison with the fragmentary artistic snatches of the poetic mode. Footage supports the comments made by interviewees.

Helvetica: Expository Mode Categories	Examples
Assembles fragments: rhetorical/argumentative frame	Multiple interviews, speakers' names not identified (1/01:50 – 02:50)
Images: Illuminate/Illustrate/Support Basic Claims	**Illuminate**: NY Times Sq.,shows pervasiveness of Helvetica, everyday life, "All the News that's Fit to Print"(1/01:30) **Illustrate**: Intercut images interviewees & NY street scenes (1/01:50 – 03:07);

	Bloomingdale's signage illustrates Massini Vignell's commentary ((2/01:50) Subway map unfolds, illustrated by shot of subway station entrance (2/02:30) Street scenes of Helvetica type signage (4/00:00-00:30)
Highly controlled: Staging/Composition	Open book center of shot (2/01:30)

Table 2: Sample scenes in Helvetica identified as Expository Mode Categories

The observational mode, examples of which are listed in Table 3, is more subtle than the poetic or expository modes. Hidden messages are conveyed and extra information is included from other locations.
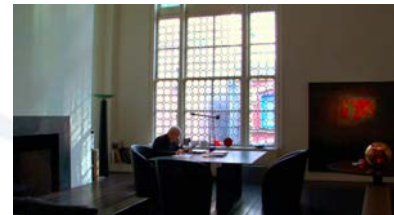
Helvetica: **Observational Mode Categories**	**Examples**
Makes inferences based on behavior	Examples of Helvetica typeface examples from multiple locations in multiple countries (1/00:00)
Resembles "rushes" (unedited footage)	Hand-held camera during interview with Massimo Vignelli (2/01:35)
Body language	Rick Poyner gesturing about typefaces in interview to (3/00:00), also Wim Crouwel gesturing in interview (4/03:10)
Eye contact	Eye contact with off-camera interviewers (1/01:50)
Intonation	Matthew Carter uses a deprecatory tone talking about his job as a type designer (5/05:45)

Table 3: Sample scenes in Helvetica identified as Observational Mode Categories

In Table 4, the sense of participation is intensified through casual comments by interviewees and unedited footage is left in presumably to enhance the sense of documentary spontaneity or create an atmosphere of

cinéma vérité. Other sources such as library footage and old photographs are included for this too.

Helvetica: Participatory Mode Categories	Examples
Filmmaker (FM) and subject response to each other	Filmmaker making subject comfortable Massimo Vignelli, "How should I talk? Or not talk? Say something? Say nothing?" (2/00:00)
Resembles cinéma vérité	Filmmaker making subject comfortable Massimo Vignelli, "How should I talk? Or not talk? Say something? Say nothing?" (2/00:00)
Interviews: Brings voice of FM into story	Interviewees tell the story of Helvetica and express the view of the FM (1/01:50)
Interviews: Enriches commentary with individual voices	Voices of four type designers about the ubiquity, aesthetics and attitude of designers to Helvetica (1/01:50)
Interviews: Oral history	Matthew Carter (type designer) talks about his father (5/00:00); Origins of Helvetica (Eduard Hoffman and Max Miedinger (5/05:20)
Interviews: FM presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	Voices of four type designers about the ubiquity, aesthetics and attitude of designers to Helvetica (1/01:50)
Situated Engagement	Matthew Carter designing typeface on computer (5/02:20)

Table 4: Sample scenes in Helvetica identified as Participatory Mode Categories

Analysis of *Never Sorry: Ai Wei Wei*

Tables 5 to 8 present examples of Nichols' modes of Poetic, Expository, Observational and Participatory Modes to analyze Klayman's *Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry.*

In Table 5 the montage is the predominant focus. The pace of editing these fragmentary images can vary from a slower rhythm, as illustrated by the long footage of the work camp still, to the rapid pacing of Ai

Wei Wei's famous "finger" defying still shots. Metaphorical images also come to life in this mode with examples of language that evoke images such as Ai Wei Wei's assistant saying, "I'm an assassin." Archival and news footage is also an important element in this mode (Chengdu Earthquake news footage, television broadcast news stories and the Beijing Olympic displacement footage), lending a dose of realism and authenticity to the film's structure. Poetic nuances are also revealed in the framing of shots, illustrated by the director's partial framing of Ai Wei Wei's face with no eyes near the beginning of the film.

Never Sorry: Poetic Mode Categories	Examples
Editing: Rhythm	Work camp still: 8 sec. (3/02:15)
Draws on historical world	Analogic mode: flashback to AWW father's story- explains AWW's activism (3/01:15)
Series of fragments	Huang Intv, AWW on camera, Huang Intv, 3 "finger"stills (1/05:06)
Subjective impression	Metaphor: AWW's assistant: "I'm an assassin." Meaning – AWW's controlling persona ((1/04:13) Archival Footage: common people taunting intellectuals(3/02:50. 03:00)
Elements of memory	AWW: "These are experiences I cannot erase"- Family still (3/03:45)
Abrupt shift of time and space	Shift from Hotel room (Chengdu) to Munich (4/00:02)
Use of historical footage	News footage displaced residents-Olympics (1/08:15) Earthquake news footage (2/00:58) AWW"s father (3/01:25); (3/02:15)
Use of fast motion	AWW running into house(1/03:45)
Framing of the Shot	AWW's partial face, no eyes (3/01:50);

Table 5: Sample scenes in Never Sorry identified as Poetic Mode Categories

In Table 6 the cinematic techniques in the expository mode reinforce the director's/Ai Wei Wei's overall argument. Also present in this mode is an inconsistency because cinematically the images are supposed to be somewhat objective, but at the same time support the director's/Ai Wei Wei's general argument. An example of this is the scene near the beginning of the movie when Ai Wei Wei says "I consider myself more of a chess

player" and this interview is then followed by scenes of dogs playing. Further illustrations of this attempt to present more objective images are the numerous slides with white text on a black background conveying simple factual messages such as: "More than 70,000 people died in the earthquake". Finally another aspect of this mode is the director's usage of highly controlled staged footage as illustrated by the still shot of Ai Wei Wei standing behind a big cooking pot.

Never Sorry: Expository Mode Categories	Examples
Assembles fragments: rhetorical/argumentative frame	Intv: Karen Smith "Intellectuals all suffered in 1957" (3/02:38)
Addresses the viewer directly	AWW talks to camera directly (3/00:44)
Titles	White Text/black background: "More than 70,000 people died in the earthquake" (2/1:46) (2/02:25);(2/-5:32); (2/05:56); (2/06:14);(3/04:34); (3/07:29)
Images: Illuminate/Illustrate/Support Basic Claims	"I consider myself more of a chess player" (1/06:45) Illustrate: Dogs Playing(1/ 6:56) Support Basic Claims: Twitter Computer screen shots: (2/03:25); (3/03:52); (3/06:54)
Highly controlled: Staging/Arrangement	AWW in Pot (1/05:54)
Common sense – meshes with peoples' general beliefs	Cat metaphor: "Out of 40 cats one knows how to open the door" Meaning: Only a few people become activists (1/02:00)

Table 6: Sample scenes in Never Sorry identified as Expository Mode Categories

Examples of the observational mode, which are listed in Table 7, are more subtle than the poetic or expository modes. Considerable use was made of hand held smartphone footage, particularly videos posted on Ai Wei Wei's website. It was also noted that on several occasions one camera was used to record the primary camera recording Ai Wei Wei being interviewed.

Never Sorry: Observational Mode Categories	Examples

Reveals aspects of character	AWW staging: finger gesturing (1/05:50)
Resembles "rushes" (unedited footage)	AWW as provocateur in hotel with police: hand-held camera (3/05:15)
Body language	Answer to journalist's Sichuan earthquake question, AWW doesn't speak, cut to earthquake victim footage (2/00:45)
Eye contact	Camera films AWW speaking to another camera (1/06:45)
Intonation	Slow, low intonation to give authority to his words "I consider myself a chess player." (1/06:45)

Table 7: Sample scenes in Never Sorry identified as Observational Mode Categories

In Table 8, the sense of participation is intensified through performances by Ai Wei Wei himself by, for example, breaking a valuable vase and interviewees recalling the past or celebrating the achievements of Ai Wei Wei. Other sources such as library footage and old photographs are included in this film too.

Never Sorry: Participatory Mode Categories	**Examples**
Filmmaker (FM) and subject response to each other	AWW leaning toward FM (2/05:40)
Filmmaker's role: Engaging and Collaborator	FM smiling and showing support in interview (2/5:40)
Resembles cinéma vérité	Hand-held camera-phone in police confrontation hotel scene (3/07:20)

Interviews: bring different accounts to story	AWW brother Ai Dan talks about family life (Ken Burns effect) (3/03:00)
Interviews: Brings voice of FM into story	Praise for AWW by curators & journalists (Cohen: 1/05:17; Tinari: 1/05:40; Feng: 1/06:18; Chen: 1/07:50)
Interviews: Enriches commentary with individual voices	Earthquake volunteers comment on why they joined AWW project to collect names (2/03:35)
Interviews: Oral history	AWW brother Ai Dan (3/03:00), film critic (AWW father) (3/01:30)
Interviews: FM presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	AWW breaking Han vase: Ethan Cohen (1/05:17), Evan Osmos, New Yorker (2/02:20)
Viewers witness emotion of subject	Journalist asks "What inspired you?" AWW doesn't answer immediately (2/00:45)

Table 8: Sample scenes in Never Sorry identified as Participational Mode Categories

Discussion

 After considering the deconstructive analysis of the two films we are left with the questions, "Is Nichols' model useful for filmmakers to approach their craft?" and "Is Nichols' model useful for film critics to interpret documentary films?" The following observations are offered:

Implications for Filmmakers and Film Critics: Techniques of Verisimilitude
In both Hustwit's and Klayman's films, their directorial vision could be revealed through:

- Their representation of reality through camerawork simulating cinéma vérité.
- Their cinematic voice, particularly through judicious choice of interviewees.

Implications for Filmmakers and Film Critics: Narration and Narrators

- Both films told a worthwhile story and created a powerful message.
- Both filmmakers revealed values illuminate: in Helvetica we are introduced to the complexities of a little publicized craft, typography, whereas Ai Wei Wei's struggle with authorities showed the value of political freedom.
- Contributions by interviewees in each film were crucial to telling the story so that voice-over narration became unnecessary.
- As a result, interviewing techniques allowed the story to be told by people close to the subject.

Implications for Filmmakers and Film Critics: Cinematography

- In both films artistic images were effectively used, the use of Helvetica fonts in and Ai Wei Wei's art works.
- A variety of footage ranging from grainy archival shots to high quality contemporary lent the air of veracity to both films.
- Still pictures were used in both films to illustrate historical references.

Implications for Filmmakers and Film Critics: Editing

- Both films were tightly edited as was evident when cutting, dissolves, audio fades were analyzed.
- The significance of openings and closings contributed to the films' overall message.
- The films achieved a balance of film length, visuality, sound and effects to tell the story effectively.

Overall Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of the Nichols' taxonomy for "deconstructing" documentary films resulted in considerable support and a couple of concerns.

Support for Using Nichols' Taxonomy:
- Filmmaking techniques and narrative structure can be interpreted through Nichols' Mode Taxonomy.
- Scenes from documentaries, and documentaries themselves can be classified into primary and secondary modes.

Concerns for Using Nichols' Taxonomy
- Extending Nichols' mode model into a taxonomy of documentary genres may not be feasible. In fact Nichols himself notes that his modes are only "something like sub-genres of documentary films" (Nichols, 2010:99).
- The first four modes are more easily applied to documentary films.
- Reflexive and performative modes require refining in definition and elaboration and little evidence for these modes was found in this analysis.

In summary, this study suggested a possible direction for film analysis using modes for scene by scene analysis. Apprentice filmmakers and film critics might benefit from studying such an approach.

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