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Introduction: Documentary in the era of COVID-19

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Documentary, despite its vague and problematic generic boundaries, has stood the test of time. Its roots stretch down further than the beginnings of cinema, back into the early years of photography and cinema's forebears such as the magic lantern. Due to this long reach, it is also anchored in a range of media forms and genres that have evolved since the beginning of mass electronic communication, giving documentary a choice of homes and retreats, if circumstances ever threatened its existence. Immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic, documentary arguably, had never been stronger commercially. It had a presence in the new global SVOD platforms that few would have predicted back in the age of broadcast and VHS/DVD, and had been at the forefront of adaptations to the possibilities and limitations of numerous waves of interactive and web-bourne innovations in cinema, showcasing a tremendous ability to sustain its presence and viability despite ongoing artistic and technological disruptions.

Documentary's tenuous grip on its ascription as scientific evidence also remained intact despite the ravages of postmodernism and the ubiquity and embeddedness of screens, and screen representations, in our daily lives. Documentary's paradoxical relationship to the real served to preserve its flexibility in reacting to evolving philosophical and cultural formulations of reality, allowing it to survive the rupture from idealism (Grierson 1933), to structuralism (Barnouw 1993), to post structuralism (Winston 2008), to new materiality (Hongisto, 2013), and beyond to the post-cinematic and the post-humanist (Nash, 2021). One might say that documentary is no stranger to disruption, and that part of the documentary's function is to grasp the emergence of events, and the flow of time, in its ever-flexible and re-inventable form(s).

Such an optimistic perspective might certainly have been the general outlook on documentary at the beginning of 2020. Since then, the COVID pandemic has provided a stern challenge to all forms of human organisation across the world, and documentary has not been immune to this challenge. Established binaries in economics, business, politics, culture and media have been tested and at times overthrown, with no clear end in sight to the disruption. The challenges posed by the pandemic have had a seismic influence on the viability and long-term sustainability of the cultural industries struggling to keep production and exhibition venues running. Such concerns especially impact on the bottom line of creatives who have in some cases had to rethink the viability of their creative practices. And even as the film industry has established a wide-ranging set of COVID mitigation practices to allow for film production to continue (including COVID coordinators on set, extensive social distancing regimes and so on - see Fortmueller, 2022; Kaapa 2022), such measures are very cost-intensive and mostly apply to large-scale productions that can afford them. These often evade documentary productions that tend to be premised on more intimate personal connections and less intensive industrial practices, especially as the policies introduced by the sector often require more human resources and intensive management of material expenditure. Furthermore, with the pandemic requiring extensive advance planning and minimizing close human collaboration, the essence of documentary as an often-serendipitous and dynamic form has been challenged, as advanced scheduling and production coordination have become increasingly central to film production.

Opportunities and challenges

How has documentary as a form, a behaviour, a community, a technological interface, adapted in the face of one of the greatest challenges to human organisation since, potentially, the end of WWII. This book cannot begin to answer that question in its entirety, as the ramifications of the COVID pandemic will probably continue to affect the conduct and organisation of the creative industries for decades to come.

But what this book does seek to do is scope out the reaction of documentary film culture(s) within the context of the 'new normal' - that useful but opaque label given to our present period of global all-encompassing paralysis. Documentary filmmaking was, unsurprisingly, fundamentally disrupted by the pandemic, but it is vital to note that there is no one unique 'documentary experience' but that the pandemic's impacts were felt in multiple ways in different contexts. From policy and governance decisions made by organisations coordinating a sectoral response often in collaboration with governments to micro-decisions made by individual filmmakers on the ground, the scope and mode of

response differs considerably. Similarly, cultural variations inflect the ways the pandemic impacted the form. Documentary film production and 'culture' is extremely diverse with an extensive range of practices and modes - from small-scale intimate artistic documentaries to big budget undertakings involving hundreds of participants. Similarly, the range of responses to the pandemic's challenges are multifold. Whether focusing on documentary's power to participate and represent (as in China's top-down response to pandemic communication, as discussed in chapter 8) or the opportunity of new audiences to create their own responses (as in Denmark's emphasis on using film as a means to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on children, as discussed in chapter 7), different film cultures and creative agencies responded in surprisingly creative ways to the pandemic's many challenges. Technology came to play an unsurprisingly central role in facilitating ongoing creative activity despite location and studio shooting coming to a halt as online platforms and virtual spaces facilitated, for example, collaborative editing and virtual festival screenings. Experimental approaches and emerging engagements with both virtual and augmented reality allowed existing forms like interactive documentary to evolve under the limiting conditions, especially as film distribution and exhibition scrambled to carve out new pathways to have content reach audiences.

These diverse optimistic developments are simultaneously undercut by the many stories of personal and organisational financial and creative disasters that the pandemic generated. Not only did the restrictions on face-to-face participation effectively cut out festival screenings and awards (one of the main means of generating interest and attention capital for documentaries), but it also led to the rechannelling of public funds into urgent emergency measures, vitally undermining documentary production which is often reliant on such funds (as can be seen in chapter 9 and 11). In addition to these emergency measures, the pandemic also exacerbated existing inequalities and forms of exploitation as most of the COVID recovery funds were allocated to large productions and companies/creatives with established reputations, further marginalising the position of emerging filmmakers or ones from underprivileged backgrounds.

Thus, while it is perhaps necessary to talk of multiple documentary responses to the pandemic, there are also shared and commonplace aspects that facilitate a 'documentary', form-level, approach to the pandemic. These include the precarious position of the form in a transformed digital media landscape, the proliferation of non-fiction content on various streaming and social media platforms, challenges to creative and critical reporting in times of dis- and misinformation, as well as the increased commercial and critical popularity of certain documentary films with general audiences. While the notion of documentary as a genre or unified form is appropriately contested, there are advantages to approaching it on this level, both in terms of industry consolidation (the various discussions in chapters on the ways documentary filmmakers and organisations pooled their resources to support one another and increase the profile of their art form) and academia (drawing on a wide interdisciplinary field of film and media studies to evaluate how documentary scholarship needs to be rethought in the wake of the pandemic disruption).

Accordingly, this book presents a snapshot of how documentary has begun to evolve in this new normal. At times the chapters reveal the tensions and preoccupations that documentary found itself dealing with immediately before the pandemic, now writ large under the extreme pressure of the every day. At other times, documentary production has been able to carry on, showing its worth in a situation where communication becomes essential and hazardous. The chapters in this collection testify to the complex responses across global documentary film cultures. In some cases, they show how plans and production activities were put on hold as social restrictions made the interactivity required for capturing a documentary's theme impossible. In others, the contributions explore the cutbacks in funding and support for documentary production which meant that productions had to shut down or alter their approach to make do with the reduced means afforded to them.

The book is organised into four sections to chronicle the diverse developments, challenges, responses and modes of resilience that the COVID pandemic generated. Starting out with Setting the Scene: Views from the Frontline, the volume provides on-the-ground reflection of these tumultuous developments from the perspective of documentary filmmakers. Anna Wiehl engages Sandra Gaudenzi and Sandra Tabares Dugue in conversation on interactive and immersive documentary. While these forms have been especially challenged by pandemic restrictions due to their reliance on human interaction, they also give rise to discourses of techno-optimism. The role of digital media, whether in the form of an endless array of video calling software or the increased reliance on media platforms, has been highlighted as one of the solutions to our socially-distanced world. But at the

same time, these solutions emphasise the fragility of human interconnectedness as they have been repeatedly criticised for being inadequate solutions. Steve Presence and Alison Quigley provide an interview with key members of the British Film Institute's DocSociety venture, providing a hands-on look at COVID responses and policy-related developments from the perspective of governance of the documentary production ecosystem in Britain. Both chapters initiate the multi-vocal perspective that is essential to capturing the complex ways in which institutions and creatives responded to COVID-19.

Section 2, Experimental Practices and Technological Innovations, takes up the role of technology as a tool for navigating the restrictions the pandemic placed on daily life and creative activity as well as a means to capture the unusual and often artistically challenging experience of prolonged uncertainty amidst lockdowns. New technologies like interactive platforms and virtual/augmented reality had been integrated into documentary film production pre-pandemic resulting in interactive documentaries that use digital innovations in ways that can re-envision the meaning of documentary by integrating the audience into the production and the text in innovative ways. Wiehl's interview with Gaudenzi and Tabares Dugue initiates this discussion which is taken up by Joan Soler-Adillon, Uwe Bremmer and Katja Bettina Lange's chapter on VR documentaries. They outline a scenario where new experimental practices have been, in an almost-paradoxical way, expedited by the disruptions of the pandemic. Such perspectives are vital reminders that disruption can lead to the (necessary) innovation required to live with the disruption, but they can also provide the foundations for creative innovation that leads to new forms and technological leaps.

Kim Munro's chapter follows a similar line of argumentation as it focuses on media technologies and environmental documentaries. She uncovers a range of socially-distanced, technologically-enabled approaches, spurred on by the pandemic's restrictions, to rethink the ecological role of documentary film production and content. These chapters suggest that it is this oscillation between the dynamics of innovation and restriction (in essence, of disruption) that characterises documentary filmmaking in times of COVID. Expanding on these concerns, Catherine Cough-Brady provides a personal assessment through her reflection of the production of a documentary she completed during the pandemic. These personal reflections on the artistic and practical challenges of pandemic production provide firsthand insight into how initial plans for documentaries had to be transformed to cope with the new reality, including both production practices and creative decisions. Together these chapters provide an interrogation of the changing responses of practitioners and audiences to, firstly, the pandemic crisis at hand, and secondly, the wider context of an ecological emergency that the pandemic, in many ways, is a part of.

The following section, COVID-19 and Changing Documentary Perspectives, explores creative challenges to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Unable to work with or on conventional topics, filmmakers had to adapt to new ways of producing films and capturing 'reality', including both political/journalistic topics and everyday life. Eva Nordrup Redvall captures a particularly invigorating example of the ways that children chronicled the unusual circumstances of life in isolation through mobile and other digital technologies. Once again, we see how the pandemic led to new creative practices but also eventually to a sense of exasperation and disconnection that online connectedness could not alleviate. Simultaneously, these practices raise important questions about privilege and access to tools to make films in a time of crisis, embodied by the image of the trampoline as a sign of privilege, as only some children in Denmark would have had the luxury of a garden in which to capture their footage. Addressing questions of representation directly, Jian Xu and Weiwei Xu evaluate the ways that COVID was depicted in documentaries and the ways in which these films had an important public service (and political) function. They discuss representations of China in state-produced English language documentaries aimed at international audiences and ask fundamental questions about the politics of representing the pandemic especially as the role of media has become increasingly vital in the culture wars escalated by the pandemic.

The focus of this section on Denmark and China leads us to chapters that focus on specific geo-cultural locations and the first-responses in terms of policies and practical frameworks established to support documentary production and consumption internationally. Questions on the interrelations between documentary content, production practice and film and culture policy are explored in the next section Institutional Responses to Disruption with three chapters focusing on the strategies adopted in the UK, Netherlands, and South Africa. The section's first contribution is Steve Presence's exploration of the documentary sector in the UK, where provides analysis comparing historical developments in documentary production in the UK with the wider disruption caused by the pandemic. The chapter

suggests that the pandemic in many ways exacerbated existing problems - such as concerns with labour equality and a chronic lack of funding - but that the disruption also brought the industry together in a more effective way than in the past. Anna Zoellner and Wilhelmina Sanders elaborate on this discussion by focusing on the production context in the UK and Netherlands, contrasting the disruption mitigation policies and sustainability practices in these two Northern European contexts. They expand on Presence's historical study and provide an insightful comparative exploration of Northern European responses, contextualising their analysis with extensive incorporation of perspectives from organisational and crisis management strategies. Finally, Liani Maasdorp's article emphasises the disruptive and often calamitous impacts of the pandemic on documentary filmmakers in South Africa. Here, the discussion excavates searing inequality made worse by the pandemic despite measures taken by the government to try to sustain documentary film production and distribution.

The range of responses to and reflections on arguably one of the largest disruptions in contemporary human history included in this book showcases two aspects overall: 1) documentary production and practice is precarious, challenged by ongoing technological, industrial, societal and cultural transformation, all processes exacerbated by the disruptions of the pandemic, but simultaneously, 2) that documentary, as a creative practice and media form, continues to be both surprisingly resilient and increasingly important in responding to wider societal transformations. These chapters act as on-the-ground commentaries by practitioners and creatives focused on the experience of producing documentaries in the age of COVID 19. They act as a historical chronology - very much situated in their time of writing - that documents a set of creative responses and challenges to concerns like the lockdowns and termination of contracts and work arrangements. While the precarious role of documentary filmmakers emerges especially prominently in these chapters as the role of public funding was severely diminished by the pandemic and resulted in substantial challenges to the livelihoods of documentary producers, it also led to instances of innovative resilience on behalf of both documentary producers and media managers, but most often in contexts enjoying the privilege of ample public funding and support infrastructures.

There is a powerful sense of disruption and resilience emerging from all contributions to this book but what comes through strongest is the sense that the pandemic ought to not only be a return to the status quo. Instead it provides an opportunity to address persisting inequalities and dynamics of power and rethink the ways technology and society, capitalism and creativity intertwine. Unfortunately, and perhaps most frighteningly, there is also a sense of pessimism permeating these contributions as the optimistic perceptions and opportunities were often ignored or sidelined in favour of business-as-usual as soon as the opportunity afforded it, or even more concerningly, a permanent displacement of marginalised or emerging filmmakers from gaining entry into or a solid foothold in the sector amongst the disruption. Even in the most forward-looking of contexts and cases, such as with Denmark's films by children, inequalities in terms of access to filmmaking becomes pervasive. Magnified on a global scale, they are even more pressing when considered in the context of South African filmmaking or even in supposedly affluent contexts like the UK. While the big picture may reveal an industry quickly stabilising in response to disruption, what is left out of this picture matters. Indeed, the many stories and analyses of resilience and innovation in these chapters testify to the artistic and academic resilience of the international documentary film cultures, but they also emphasise the relevance of critical documentary film scholarship in highlighting the on-going injustice alongside the more optimistic explorations of the form's ongoing evolution.

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