

i-Docs as 'Contagions of Hope'

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BOOK REVIEWS

i-Docs as ‘Contagions of Hope’*

On a cool afternoon in late March in Bristol, the biannual symposium i-Docs 2018 kicks off with the three co-directors Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi and Mandy Rose riffing on the ‘i’s’ or eyes or ayes of the ‘i’ in i-Docs. Collectively Aston, Gaudenzi and Rose suggest that opening up the original idea of interactive documentary into a space which also represents immersion, intervention, impact and innovation reflects the mutable, non-definable and open space that has become i-Docs. These keywords are expanded on as they allude to how the intersection of documentary and technology can find new ways to connect with audiences, imagine futures and further expand documentary’s engagement with social, political, personal, global and local issues.

As a first time visitor, I’m most looking forward to hearing about projects as well as the possibility of experiencing some of the ones that won’t make their way to Australia. I am also initially impressed with the more intimate, practice-based and contained feeling compared to the larger and more traditionally academic counterpart, Visible Evidence. Battling the time-shift and jet lag from my trip from Melbourne, I present this review through my limited experience of what I see over the three days of the symposium. It is easy to witness an overarching interest in all advances technologic – evidenced by the number of VR talks and projects as well as augmented reality, photogrammetry and biometric testing of empathy responses. However, navigating between the triad of documentary positions of audience, maker and participant, as well as the desire to apply these technologies to environmental and social contexts, underlies much of the work I see.

Like many symposia or conferences (and media more broadly), there is much competing for attention: keynotes, parallel sessions, works-in-progress, workshops and a showcase of works – mostly VR. One of the key trajectories of i-Docs research and practice is an interest in how emerging practices and technologies can reach further into documentary’s traditional social function of facilitating more and varied voices to be heard, but also allow for non-traditional ways of making and more collaborative, pedagogical and accessible modes of production and being part of the documentary’s ecology.

Opening the conference and setting the tone is Liz Miller’s keynote about her *Shoreline Project*, a collaborative, pedagogically astute global interactive documentary project which addresses climate change’s impact on shorelines around the world. While creating a project which is clearly accessible for educational reach, Miller has also devised a strategy to get this work into the classrooms, reinforcing its relevance by highlighting environmental work by young activists. She also suggests using the idea of the classroom as a collaborative framework which can have ongoing implications for how we might learn to engage with others and the environment. Speaking with both optimism and realism, Miller asks the greater questions which relate to many works in the broader landscape of documentary; how can we create deeper experiences which are often part of linear documentary films while using the affordances of these new spaces of engagement, and how might we create guiding paths through multi-linear documentary with so much content without becoming prescriptive and constrained? Miller’s presiding imperative of creating a ‘contagion of hope’ sounds exciting in such contemporary times of doom.

*(a phrase borrowed from Liz Miller in her i-Docs keynote on her *Shoreline* project).

The opening night's immersive planetarium screening of Roderick Coover and Scott Rettberg's *Hearts and Minds: The Interrogation Project* offered an exploration of returned soldiers' participation in practices of torture and interrogation in Iraq. The experience feels a bit like being in a video game and I find in this forum, the technology does not add much to the already traumatic personal accounts. Most of the other work on show is individual experiences and predominantly VR, the medium which has over the last few years sucked up most of the funding and interest in the interactive or expanded documentary world. I continue to remain sceptical about the experience of these works and due to the long queues at the immersive showcase, I only manage to see Hyphen-Labs's *NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism*. This VR work, which represents part of their more extensive project, takes me on a voyage from the body of a black woman in a hair salon-like 'neurocosmotology lab', flying through a futuristic 'multiverse' and back again. It ends too soon and I find for the first time that I want more of this other-world, and wonder if I've been won over. In her presentation about *NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism*, Carmen Aguilar Y Wedge says that by positioning the audience as a black woman, which for most people would be the position on an Other, they are more able to imagine what it's like to have a black body. This perspective, she argues, has the potential to decrease prejudice and bias. This presents VR as a tool to rethink issues of representation of black female bodies. However, in this exhibition, the scaled down and decontextualised version of this work renders the potential to really position the audience as the intended Other somewhat diminished.

The other project that I experience is Duncan Speakman's *It Must Have Been Dark by Then*, which is a part directed and part self-initiated audio walk around the harbour and symposium environs. This work is aurally immersive and despite the bitter coldness in the late afternoon retreating light, it manages to both connect me to the routes I walk and summon Louisiana, Latvia and the Sahara desert through a soundscape and stories of travel, home and exile, evoking global refugee experiences. As we walk, we create unique and temporary maps on the iPhone we have been loaned. This experience also asks us to reflect on our memories and future, while imagining how this might be for the other who must flee their homelands.


The workshops, which I attended in varying degrees of duration, function as sites to enact collective thinking and making and provide a welcome lo-fi addition to the symposium. This ethos is also re-iterated in the *What IF IT Session* in which multi-disciplinary practitioners speak of the benefits of prototyping interactive works through paper, collage, photos and glue – reminding us that the tactile and the analogue has a continuing place alongside the software. On the first afternoon I went to Alistair Gall and Kelly Zarin's *Workshopping an Imperfect I-Doc Praxis* where we are given tasks to partner up and go out and film with our phones using DIY filters from chocolate wrappers, Vaseline, rudimentary pin-holes, and specific constraints. These clips are uploaded to a site, Yarn Community¹ and form the basis of a collective participatory film project. Through the making, this workshop models ways which can be further adapted and personalised to engage people in collaborative practices.

Looking back at i-Docs 2018, it is with both enthusiasm for documentary practices and possibilities as well as the usual conference retrospective feeling of not having seen and heard enough. With so many sessions, projects, keynotes and conversions, what I experienced was only a fraction. However, being at i-Docs felt like the participatory, sustainable and ethical practices were not only spoken of through the work, but often reflected and enacted through the ways the sessions were imagined and run. Throughout the three days a few prevalent themes emerged. The first is that while technology heralds many possibilities for documentary's ongoing shape-shifting potential, the role of people as stewards for the work can still be essential in reaching audiences. This is evidenced by the role of idocs as an event that brings people together in a room for a shared experience. With so many works in progress being discussed,

practitioners talking through their processes, it is also encouraging to witness trials, attempts and failures. It was a reminder that not everything has to be a success, and much learning and conversation can emerge from documentary projects that don't work out as planned. Another theme was hope. This was evident in the many projects that engaged with issues that are socially, politically and environmentally critical and which sought to find new ways of speaking and listening, opening up possibilities for 'contagions of hope'. The stimulating environment and debates that i-Docs affords attests to the ongoing relevance of such forums in drawing together people in a community of dialogue and practice.

Note

1. <http://yarncommunity.com/>

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Docudrama on European television: a selective survey, edited by Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Derek Paget, London, Palgrave, Palgrave European Film and Media Studies, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016, 285 pp., £89.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-137-49978-3

If docudrama began as a genre for new times in the post Cold War half of the twentieth century, it has reemerged as a genre for our times as we head into debates around the possibility of a unified Europe.

This volume, the first book length study of the genre in Europe, comes at a time when the very notion of 'European' is being contested. Further, as these discussions continue around a reconfigured European Union (without, at least, the UK), there are also concerns about how this will impact the various national industrial frameworks, and co-production relationships within which the genre currently operates. Alongside this, are broader discussions about the exhibition and distribution of content, and the reconfiguration of television itself.

Interesting times for a genre that, as this book demonstrates, has been deeply connected to these ideas and notions. As many of the authors argue, Docudrama has been at the center of discussions around identity, history and personal memory, as well as being firmly located in the history of television itself. Its also been a site for a particular set of industrial practices, practices that rely on co-production and collaboration, as much as national and local distinctiveness.

The collection takes a 'selected survey approach', comparing and contrasting the discourses and practices that inform the genre within Europe. The genre has a mixed history in the region; from the rich traditions established in the UK through the work of Kosminsky and Loach, as well as tradition of verbatim theater, to the newer variants in countries such as Sweden and Poland. The German docudrama shows clearly how the form has been central to both a re-writing of personal memories and national history, and a journey of reunification. What is