

31

FILMMAKING

Matthew Gandy

There is no such thing as *documentary*—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha¹

Film brings people and cultures alive on the screen, capturing the sensation of living presence, in a way that neither words nor even still photos can. The cumulation of successive film frames evokes the sensation of movement over time quite literally *through* movement over time. Film language is the language of moving, seeing, and hearing. More than any other medium or art form, film uses experience to express experience.

Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor²

In this brief overview I want to consider a series of conceptual and practical dimensions to filmmaking in geography. My focus here is on documentary filmmaking rather than a more general emphasis on the use of visual methods. Classic definitions of the documentary form stress a clear relationship to a real or substantive subject matter although there are multiple fields of complexity between what might be regarded as a cinematic rendition of “reality” and the production of a cultural artefact that can be shared with a wider audience. When we consider the documentary form there are a number of recurring elements: the use of focus or perspective to highlight different themes, protagonists, or a particular point of view; the use of a narrative framing, either implicit or explicit, that lends the overall work a degree of coherence or wider meaning; and a putative relation to some kind of specific subject matter or lived reality that serves as a referent point for the film.

Drawing on my own experience as an academic who writes about film and also makes films I want to reflect on the role of documentary filmmaking in geographical research. I am interested in how filmmaking might enrich the research process and also reach wider audiences beyond the academy. Filmmaking is a distinctive kind of research method that spans a range of conceptual, technical, and practical issues. I use the word *method* here to encompass not only practical dimensions to filmmaking but also the articulation of what we might term a “cinematic sensibility” in

relation to geographical research. Despite some recent advances, however, the field of film geography remains somewhat underdeveloped in both practical and theoretical terms although this is now changing, driven in part by growing student interest in filmmaking and visual methods.³ More broadly, there is a growing emphasis on diverse forms of creative practice in cultural geography (see [Hawkins, 2019](#); [Rogers, Gough-Brady and Berry, 2022](#)). An increasing number of geographers seek to not only collaborate with artists and filmmakers but also produce their own works as an integral dimension to their research and writing.

There has been something of a “renaissance” for documentary filmmaking since the early 2000s marked by the emergence of a growing global audience, improved access to many previously unavailable works, and even mainstream commercial success for some films (see [Banks and Ruby, 2011](#); [Rich, 2006](#)). Documentary filmmaking has also become increasingly significant within the visual arts where the use of split screens and other installation formats can emphasize multiple vantage points and produce new kinds of immersive experience. Within geography the Film Geographies platform, founded by London-based geographer Jessica Jacobs, has organized a film festival strand at successive AAG conferences since 2016 (see [Jacobs, 2024](#)). Other film screening collaborations include regular events at the RGS-IBG conferences, the Antipode Film Project, the diverse initiatives of the Philippines Geographical Society led by Joseph Palis, and the University of Zurich’s recently formed Geography Film Club.

Starting points

A common starting point for making a documentary film is an idea or synopsis, which is essential if the work involves collaboration with other people or needs external funding in order to be realized. We need to make an initial distinction, therefore, between a small-scale project perhaps involving just one researcher or filmmaker and any kind of more ambitious film that draws on a variety of wider technical or logistical expertise. A synopsis is similar to an abstract used for a research grant application in the sense that it is oriented towards a relatively broad range of readers who need to understand the wider aims of a project. A potential filmmaker must be able to convince people that their project is interesting, feasible, and worth funding. And inevitably, many planned projects must lie dormant in the hope of future realization.⁴

Although technological advances have improved the accessibility and versatility of recording equipment, the production of more complex projects remains very expensive if the aim is to produce broadcast quality works that might be in contention for inclusion in film festivals or other events.⁵ Few sources of academic funding are suited to filmmaking and any proposal must somehow make its way through a highly competitive review process. One possibility is to strategically embed films within a suite of outputs from a larger project although this can be risky since many reviewers remain sceptical of the wider value of film as a kind of research output and they may have little or no expertise in evaluating the financial or logistical aspects to filmmaking.⁶

The framing of a synopsis clearly varies depending on the nature of the subject matter. The discipline of geography encompasses a vast array of potential topics as well as possibilities for combining core themes such as “place” or “landscape” with more specific kinds of ethnographic analysis. The use of autoethnographic materials that might later be integrated into a larger project presents a specific set of challenges whilst a purely experimental approach points in a different direction. The connecting strand, however, is the creation of meaning and its relation to a wider set of discourses, both academic and non-academic. There is in other words a communicative impulse behind filmmaking based on the premise that other people may find the work interesting. There is a spectrum of narrative possibilities rooted in different configurations of human creativity and the

technical apparatus. The distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, and between documentary and non-documentary, are blurry since even the most simple formats contain traces of human intentionality.

The writing of an exposé moves beyond a simple synopsis to present a creative idea in greater detail, including key elements of narrative structure that can form the basis for planning the production schedule. For an academic filmmaker the exposé can emerge from an existing essay or published article that might lend itself to some form of visual representation. The structure of the original text may contain specific points that can suggest a potential structure for the film such as site visits or interviews (and their precise settings). The exposé typically lacks dialogue and sets out over several pages how the main themes will be addressed in a cinematic form. Beyond the exposé, a storyboard is used to plan specific scenes in greater detail which is especially significant if working from a screenplay where the interaction or dialogue between the key protagonists forms the focal point of the narrative structure. Unlike the use of a screenplay, however, the dialogue within a documentary film typically stems from interviews and other unscripted kinds of interactions.

Many documentaries make use of interviews. Indeed, there is a real opportunity here to consider how existing academic skills to illicit interesting insights can be developed into a cinematic form. Interviews can vary from more formal kinds of settings to the inclusion of serendipitous encounters derived from the filmmaking process. When I was filming *Liquid City* (2007) about urban infrastructure in Mumbai we were lucky enough to stumble across a group of maintenance workers who took time out of their tea break to provide a range of insights into what might be termed “municipal hospitality” (see [Gandy, 2009](#)). Some of the most insightful interviews depend on the development of trust and rapport over longer periods of time as part of an ethnographic immersion in specific milieu, including institutional settings such as scientific laboratories or research stations (see also [Thieme, 2012](#)). My longstanding connections with Berlin’s Institute of Urban Ecology, for example, were undoubtedly significant in enabling the development of key themes for *Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin* (2017) ([Figure 31.1](#)) (see also [Ernwein, 2019](#);



Figure 31.1 *Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin* (Dir.: Matthew Gandy, 2017)

Lawton et al., 2019). If an interviewee thinks that a filmmaker cares about what they are saying or has an in-depth understanding of the topic there is a much better chance of an insightful outcome, including the capacity of the interviewer to respond with follow-up questions or guide the conversation in an interesting direction. In some cases, several people can be involved in discussing particular topics to generate a kind of interactive dynamic ranging from pre-arranged encounters to the filming of larger-scale events such as demonstrations, public meetings, or student gatherings. Examples include Mati Diop's award-winning *Dahomey* (2024), where a large group of students at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi discuss the repatriation of 26 artefacts from France to Benin, posing multiple questions about the meaning of cultural heritage.

Editing can be conceived as a kind of audio-visual language of its own with a distinctive repertoire of codes, symbols, and syntactical elements. As Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor (1997, p. 8) note: "Filming is as much a process of selectivity and interpretation as writing; there's some distance between the actual film and what it depicts." Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1990, p. 105) suggests that: "although every film is in itself a form of ordering and closing, each closure can defy its own closure, opening onto other closures, thereby emphasizing the interval between apertures and creating a space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it." The editing process is one of condensing as well as organizing materials, involving the testing of multiple configurations to achieve the desired result.⁷ A common phrase I encountered in the editing studio for *Natura Urbana* is the need to identify "the red thread" (*der rote Faden*) which connects disparate elements into some form of narrative coherence. I recall how the studio walls were festooned with post-it notes as the film structure gradually emerged from the editing process. Both the exposé (extended synopsis) and commentary were derived from a draft chapter that I was writing alongside the film: the argument within the chapter provided an initial conceptual framing for the topic that would ultimately gain audio-visual expression.

The audio aspects of filmmaking are a key element of both field recording and post production. Indeed, sound can be considered a relatively neglected facet to the history of cinema that highlights a complex interplay between different forms of narrative and affective resonance. Thomas Elsaesser (2004, p. 77), for instance, in his overview of the evolving cinematic apparatus, asks: "Have we been fixated too exclusively on 'the image,' and forgotten about sound; have we been concentrating on films as texts, and neglected the cinema as event and experience?" Sound (and its absence) plays a critical role in enhancing or modifying the perceived meaning and narrative orientation of film. A focus on sound also unsettles narrowly text- or image-based interpretations of film by emphasizing immersive and affective dimensions to audio-visual media, including different modes of listening.⁸ As Michael Gallagher (2015, p. 477) notes in relation to what he terms the "audio drift" that combines sound recordings with walking methodologies:

Academic work conventionally follows the logic of a single-track sequence, argument followed by counter-argument, but the drift allows competing ideas to run alongside one another. This polyphonic structure requires serious labour, continually tweaking levels and timings to ensure all sides of the argument are given a fair hearing, keeping the mix busy but not too cluttered.

The careful use of ambient sounds adds to a sense of cinematic realism whilst additional elements such as music can deepen the affective intensity of key moments or transitions. A sound designer can bring further sophistication to a documentary, including the development of stereo soundscapes or the creation of multi-channel versions that are suitable for a fully equipped cinematic auditorium. If music is to be used it is also essential to ensure that permission is granted for

public screenings. Additionally, the use of film sequences from other sources as part of an intertextual narrative structure is likely to involve materials under copyright. It is useful to undertake rights research as early as possible in case significant changes need to be made to the choice of sources before the editing and post-production stage is underway.⁹

The role of a filmmaker can be conceived as an elaboration of the creative drive needed for academic authorship although the practical and logistical aspects lie closer to that of a Principal Investigator for a research project. Filmmaking is an inherently collaborative process: the more complex the project the wider the range of people who are likely to be involved encompassing cinematography, sound design, editing, and other fields. More specialized tasks include the hiring of staff for specific shots such as a steady cam operator or the use of a line producer to assist with on-site logistics.¹⁰ With larger projects it is usual to hire most of the equipment including cameras and lenses (not least because more specialized gear is prohibitively expensive to own and can quickly become outdated). Filmmaking is as much a logistical task as it is a creative challenge since a degree of chaos pervades even the best organized projects.

The post-production phase of a film project is far more time consuming than the original filming. As the anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall (2019, p. 3) notes, every film project exists in two forms: firstly, as an intensive focus of creative energies to produce a cultural artefact; and secondly, as a “work of consolidation” that is available to wider audiences. In the case of *Natura Urbana* around four weeks of filming was followed by some 18 months of post-production work encompassing not only editing (the most time consuming task of all) but also other needs such as colour correction to achieve greater consistency between different sequences, including changes in light to indicate different times of day, and the addition of sub-titles, including the creation of electronic files that can provide a choice of language. The recording of a commentary, which is a distinctive kind of writing task in itself, also requires significant time and patience to ensure that the phrasing is clear and appropriate. Decisions also have to be made about the degree of didactic orientation: is this a project aimed at disseminating specialist kinds of academic knowledge to a wider audience or is a commentary being used as a catalyst to spark different forms of creative engagement with the topic? Indeed, the decision to include a commentary marks a critical extradiegetic dimension to the narrative structure of a documentary film that is itself a focus of contestation.

Vantage points

I want to turn now to some of the distinctive representational tropes deployed in documentary films. The use of transport networks to enable cinematic transects connects to early forms of experimental filmmaking such as the Lumière Brothers classic short film *Leaving Jerusalem by railway*, completed in 1897. A train journey into Berlin is used for the striking collage effect in Walter Ruttmann’s opening sequence for *Berlin: Symphony of a city* (1927) that forms a key cinematic expression of the “new objectivity” (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) movement in Weimar Germany. In Chantal Akerman’s *News from home* (1976) the rhythm of transport networks forms the background to her depiction of New York City juxtaposed with a voiceover derived from her reading a series of letters received from her mother in Belgium (Figure 31.2). The moving perspective provides a segue between more experimental modes of filmmaking and the extensive use of vantage points in mainstream cinema. Examples of this trope include the city illuminated at night as seen from the windows of a moving train in Uli Edel’s *Christiane F* (1982) or glimpses of the Parisian banlieue visible from inside the train driver’s cabin in Claire Denis’s *35 shots of rum* (2008). The role of the vantage point can oscillate between the literal and the metaphorical: consider, for example, the



Figure 31.2 *News from home* (Dir.: Chantal Akerman, 1976)

Source: Courtesy of the British Film Institute.

sequence from Michelangelo Antonioni's *The passenger* (1975) where an open top-car is being driven along a country road lined with poplar trees. The passenger, an architecture student (played by Maria Schneider), asks the driver, a disaffected journalist (played by Jack Nicholson), "What are you running away from?" and he simply replies "Turn your back to the front seat" so that we see her watching, wind in her hair, as the tree-lined road recedes into the distance.

Filmmaking connects with interest in different modes of observation including a variety of narrative structures that focus on the act of looking (or listening) itself. Examples include Andrea Arnold's depiction of a (now demolished) high-rise housing project in Glasgow in *Red Road* (2006), the surveillance paranoia that pervades Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), and perhaps most notably Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) where a convalescing photographer (played by James Stewart) notices suspicious goings-on in a Manhattan courtyard and its overlooking apartments. The field of observation is often the focus of "making of" films that showcase the technical or logistical complexities in achieving particular kinds of cinematic outcomes. In the case of highly sophisticated wildlife documentaries, which can attract mass global audiences, these "documentaries about documentaries" can in some instances entrench auteurist perspectives focused on technical skill and occlude the strategic staging of "pristine nature" as a kind of aesthetic *tromp l'oeil* (see Louson, 2021).

What is the meaning of "rigour" or "objectivity" in relation to documentary filmmaking? Elements of chance or serendipity in relation to visual methodologies have tended to be characterized as non-scientific (see Pink, 2011). Equally, there have been concerns with the degree of "bias"

or “subjectivity” in the choice of interviewees or other subject matter (see [Pink, 2011](#)). Within geography there has certainly been a neo-positivist tendency to restrict the creative possibilities of filmmaking to a narrowly defined conception of the documentary form (see [Jacobs, 2024](#)). We are clearly dealing with a different set of evaluative criteria than those adopted within the social or physical sciences although the emphasis on post-positivist or critical realist analytical frameworks is extremely helpful in problematizing naïve readings of cinematic realism. The question of rigour must also extend to transparency in terms of the aims, funding, and wider methodological ethics that are associated with any individual project (see [Thieme, Eyer and Vorbrugg, 2019](#)). The history of documentary filmmaking includes significant propagandist elements where filmmakers have sought to bolster the claims of a specific political regime or work at a more subtle level in terms of promoting specific policies (examples include public health films associated with colonial authorities in Africa and elsewhere) (see, for example, [Bloom, 2008](#); [Fedunski, 2003](#)).

How does the evolving technical apparatus intersect with questions of academic rigour or veracity? As Thomas [Elsaesser \(2004, p. 90\)](#) notes:

The separation of cinematic realism from the correspondence theory of truth (anchored in the so-called “indexicality” of the photographic image) and its redefinition within a coherence theory of truth (based on trust, belief and shared conventions) makes more urgent a clarification of what we mean by reference, authenticity and transparency.

These questions have become more complicated in terms of the growing scope for forms of audio-visual manipulation beyond the existing creative parameters of editorial and post-production work (see [Fallon, 2019](#)). The increasing capacities for image manipulation form a visual counterpart to the impact of AI on text-based forms of communication. In such a context the potential status of documentary form as a kind of cinematic witness to key cultural or historical events is placed under intense scrutiny.

Voiceovers, commentaries, and additional information such as dates or locations are characterized as “extradiegetic” in the sense that they are extraneous to the interior or diegetic narrative structure of the film. In practice, however, this diegetic versus extradiegetic distinction is often more porous, especially if the filmmaker has an autobiographical presence within the documentary that involves direct interactions with the audience. There is an element of dramatic irony here in the knowing involvement of both the filmmaker and the audience in the production of meaning. The French filmmaker Agnès Varda is known for her intricate use of commentary that weaves in and out of her autobiographical presence in many of her works. In *The Gleaners and I* (2000), for example, which focuses on the historic right to gather leftover food after the harvest, we find an enhanced authorial presence through an autobiographical interweaving of the narrative between Varda and her protagonists. Varda uses the term *cinécriture* or “film writing” to denote a distinctive style of writing that is expressed in a cinematic setting; it is clearly a more subtle and self-reflexive mode of visual expression than earlier auteurist accounts of cinematic authorship (see [Jackson, 2010](#); [Smith, 1998](#)). In Terence Davies’s *Of time and the city* (2008) his impassioned commentary, along with his careful selection of music, is pivotal to the evocative power of the film as an autobiographical meditation on place and memory in post-war Liverpool ([Figure 31.3](#)).

The oscillating relationship between “inside” and “outside” can momentarily reveal the inner tensions of the documentary form itself. In Ben Mullinkosson’s film *The last year of darkness* (2023), for example, which documents a night club in Chengdu on the cusp of its erasure through gentrification, the drag performer Yihao momentarily turns towards the camera and addresses the director directly: “Ben, I don’t think your documentary can record me or anyone’s real life. I think



Figure 31.3 *Of time and the city* (Dir.: Terence Davies, 2008)

Source: Courtesy of the British Film Institute.

real life is something you need to feel for yourself. There can't be any editing or dressing it up." In this interesting example of breaking through the cinematic "fourth wall" we encounter a different dimension to narrative structure that makes the process of filmmaking itself more explicit.

Documentaries can bring specific issues or historical events to a broader audience, using the cinematic format to develop a compelling narrative structure. In the environmental field, for example, there are a number of influential examples such as the contamination of drinking water in Flint, Michigan, explored in *Something in the water* (Dir.: Solly Granatstein, Lucian Read, and Richard Rowley, 2016), the impact of mercury poisoning on a fishing community in *Minamata – Kanja santo sono sekai* (Dir.: Tsuchimoto Noriaki, 1971), or the effects of agro-capitalism on soil, biodiversity, and rural livelihoods in the Uckermark region north of Berlin in *Landstück* (Dir.: Volker Koepp, 2016) (see Inoue, 2019). Documentaries can also "bear witness" to specific cultural and political events such as the assassination of the Castro district major Harvey Milk in Rob Epstein's *The times of Harvey Milk* (1984), the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Patricio Guzmán's *The battle of Chile (La batalla de Chile)* (1975–1979), the surge of far-right violence against refugees and Vietnamese guest workers in former East Germany in Mark Saunders and Siobhan Cleary's *The truth lies in Rostock* (1993), or the plight of migrants in the Mediterranean in Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at sea* (2016) (see also Franceschelli and Galipo, 2021; Holland, 2020). In some cases, it is the trials and tribulations of filmmaking itself that form the focus such as Les Blank's *Burden of dreams* (1982) which captures the chaotic creation of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) or Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe's *Lost in the la Mancha* (2002) where we follow Terry Gilliam's failed first attempt to realize his Don Quixote project hampered by injury, bad weather, insurance

claims, poor choice of locations, and the many other elements that contribute to the complex anatomy of a cinematic debacle.

The documentary drama presents yet another facet to narrative strategies through the staged reenactment of real events or situations. Depending on the degree of directorial skill these works can offer new insights into specific events such as the miscarriage of justice for the five youths wrongly convicted for a high-profile rape and assault that took place in Central Park in Ava DuVernay's *When they see us* (2019) or the grassroots legal battle with the DuPont corporation over chemical pollution in Todd Haynes's *Dark Waters* (2019). Especially notable in this genre is the depiction of the uprising against French colonial rule in Gillo Pontecorvo's critically acclaimed *The battle for Algiers* (1966), which adopts a neo-realist aesthetic including newsreel type footage, extensive location shooting, and the use of mainly non-professional actors. In these and other works we can see that the boundary between documentary and "non documentary" is surprisingly porous, especially in terms of mimicking different genres of representation, or even the reconstruction of existing sources.

Modes of analysis and critique

How can we characterize filmmaking as a creative process? What modes of analysis or interpretation are best suited to the study of documentary film? The interpretation of film is necessarily multi-layered, extending well beyond a narrow emphasis on authorial intent. The emergence of "auteur structuralism" within film theory, as elaborated by Peter Wollen (1972 [1969]), marks a cinematic counterpart to the growing influence of cultural Marxism, in suggesting that film reflects wider historical, ideological, and technological dynamics that can find unconscious expression through the work of a filmmaker. In this sense Wollen draws on elements of psychoanalytic and structuralist thought in order to emphasize how any individual film marks a distillation of multiple sources of influence so that a filmmaker plays the role of an "unconscious catalyst" (p. 168). Wollen shifts attention away from a humanistic attachment to revealing some kind of universal "truth" of human experience, and instead, orientates his focus towards the capacity of a film to produce meaning, and to challenge or even shatter existing ideas:

A valuable work, a powerful work at least, is one which challenges codes, overthrows established ways of reading or looking, not simply to establish new ones, but to compel an unending dialogue, not at random but productively (p. 172).

Since the period in which Wollen was writing, and in the wake of feminist and post-structuralist critiques, we find that questions of agency, authorial intent, and the production of meaning have become more multifaceted in response to greater recognition of the inter-textual aspects of visual culture along with more polyvalent readings of subjectivity. The more descriptive or deterministic elements of early film theory have been supplanted by more nuanced conceptions of power, embodiment, and the affective dimensions to visual culture. Furthermore, there is a greater sensitivity to the possibilities for collaborative filmmaking, including the active participation of former "subjects" of the cinematic gaze, such as support for Indigenous filmmakers by the Companhia Amazônica de Filmes or the legacy of the Black Audio Collective, active in East London from 1983 to 1998 (see Akomfrah, 2015; Basu, 2008; Dias, 2022; McCreary and Murnaghan, 2020). In Lilly Baniwa's *Lithipokoroda* (2021), for

example, Indigenous artists from the city of São Gabriel da Cachoeira use the cinematic apparatus to highlight the destruction of their ancestral homeland within the Amazon rainforest. In the geographer Penelope Anthias's film *Urukurenda: In Search of the Land Without Evil* (*Īvī Maraēī*) (2025), based on extensive collaborative fieldwork, we learn about the efforts of Indigenous people in south east Bolivia to demand legal rights in the face of longstanding exploitation by landowners, environmental degradation, and emerging forms of neo-extractivism (see [Anthias, 2024](#)).

Filmmaking invites possibilities for methodological experimentation that unsettle more narrowly defined conceptions of academic rigour. Sarah [Pink \(2011\)](#), for instance, cautions against overly prescriptive approaches to ethnographic filmmaking, especially within the social sciences. Pink draws a basic distinction between “scientific-realist” perspectives and what she terms “reflexive” approaches to the use of film and other visual sources in ethnographic research (2011, p. 9). The former is related to a certain kind of attachment to scientific veracity as viewed through the prism of positivist social science whilst the latter relates to multiple conceptual configurations. At a broader level, as [Pink \(2011, p. 9\)](#) notes, there has been a perceived need within the social sciences to prove the value of audio-visual modes of representation in contrast with that of “the written word.” A certain kind of instrumentalist ethos pervades the use of visual methods in the social sciences marked by a limited or uncertain engagement with wider developments in cultural criticism and film theory. Emerging intellectual fields such as ecocriticism and the geohumanities have necessitated new configurations of interdisciplinary work that render film, literature, and other modes of representation a natural focus for analysis.

A key difference between film and other kinds of more familiar research outputs is the opportunity to reach a wider audience beyond the academy. In terms of creative orientation, however, the distinction between academic and “non-academic” domains is not clear cut since a sophisticated subject matter can certainly appeal to a wider audience. The question is better framed in terms of the choice of language or narrative framing since the use of unfamiliar terms or poor editing can act as a barrier to wider public interest.

The use of film in geography has to contend with an emerging policy emphasis on research “impact” and its uneasy relation to the humanities and the visual arts. There is clearly a tension between experimental and expository modes of documentary filmmaking: whilst the former is oriented towards the affective realm of the cinematic experience the latter is more explicitly connected to a didactic agenda (see, for example, [Bathla and Papanicolaou, 2022](#)). In a UK context, for example, the question of impact has become closely associated with institutional procedures to evaluate the societal worth or even policy influence of the humanities in a wider context of reduced funding.¹¹ A documentary presents particular difficulties in relation to attempts to demonstrate research impact: it is hard, for example, to claim that a film might have influenced public policy. Indeed, how might a critical documentary be reasonably expected to influence a reactionary government that is inherently hostile towards the arts and the humanities?

Measures of outreach such as public attendance at screenings or events are also difficult to compare or quantify. Furthermore, what role does the perceived quality of a film play in terms of critical reception in this context? The impact agenda is clearly detached from any consideration of creative or intellectual worth. We are dealing with disparate and to a significant degree incommensurate spheres of critical discourse or professional judgement. Additionally, there are different sets of evaluative criteria as we move from a brief sequence of lightly edited materials towards more complex projects aimed at wider audiences beyond the academy.

Concluding remarks

There is an emerging geographical literature at the interface between theory and method in relation to audio-visual methodologies.¹² There are tensions, however, between functionalist approaches to visual methodologies and more expansive conceptions of the creative field that might resonate with wider audiences. Cultural geography has developed an uneasy relationship with documentary filmmaking in terms of the interface between theory and method in the visual arts. At a conceptual level there have been certain assumptions about the degree of theoretical alignment between specific approaches such as non-representational theory and the use of visual methods that require greater scrutiny. Marion Ernwein, for instance, insists on a conception of embodiment that extends to the technical aspects of filmmaking itself (see [Ernwein, 2022](#)).

Changing methodological practices reflect multiple developments, not just in relation to the technical apparatus, but also in response to wider trends in visual culture. Thomas [Elsaesser \(2004\)](#) asks somewhat rhetorically, if the celluloid to digital transition can be considered comparable in scope to the earlier transition from silent to sound movies. On reflection, however, Elsaesser highlights the accentuation of incipient trends rather than a fundamental break. In terms of building a more nuanced historiography of film Elsaesser argues against both technological determinism and any recourse to forms of cinematic nostalgia. In a similar fashion [Minh-Ha \(1990, p. 76\)](#) warns against the reduction of film to “a corpus of categories” as it becomes absorbed into existing institutional parameters for the production of knowledge.

The wider recognition of “truth” as partial or multi-perspectival unsettles teleological readings of the visual arts. The de-centring of the European cultural canon in the wake of new theoretical developments in the 1980s and 1990s holds multiple implications for film and visual media (see [Balsom and Peleg, 2016](#)). Alternative historiographies of twentieth-century modernism advanced by Perry Anderson, Fredric Jameson, and other scholars introduced a range of comparative strands to cultural criticism. Jameson’s writing on cinema, for example, highlights the significance of many works from the global South that did not feature in the earlier typologies elaborated by Bazin, Deleuze, and others (see [Jameson, 1992](#)). Whilst Yuriko [Furuhata \(2013, p. 2\)](#) delineates a “cinema of actuality” emerging in a Japanese context during the 1960s and 1970s, where “avant-garde filmmakers grappled with the intertwined questions of how to radicalize cinema in light of the escalating mediatization of politics and how to situate cinema within a rapidly changing media environment.”

The meaning of the documentary form has always been in a state of flux. A looser definition of the term is best framed in relation to the scope of its narrative or didactic purpose. The boundary between the more general use of audio-visual methods and the development of documentary filmmaking remains quite porous since the routine use of audio-visual methods can serve as the inspiration to create a more complex work. Similarly, a single recorded interview might prove so rich that it lends itself to a more elaborate kind of cinematic treatment.

Notes

- 1 [Minh-Ha \(1990\)](#) p. 76.
- 2 Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor (1997) p. 1.
- 3 Students often ask about submitting audio-visual materials as technical appendices for written work submissions. There is also growing interest in the possibility for practice-based assessment to supplement more conventional types of assessment for essays or dissertations (see [Hawkins, 2019](#)). On the interface between theory, practice, and pedagogy in relation to ethnographic filmmaking see also [Bathla and Papanicolaou \(2022\)](#).

- 4 I have two unfunded film projects that I hope to realize one day: a natural history documentary on moths, light pollution, and nocturnal ecology and a film about avian flyways over the disappearing urban wetlands of Chennai.
- 5 Expanding the use of filmmaking in postgraduate research has significant financial implications. Aled Singleton (2024) notes, for example, that his PhD budget would only enable him to make a three-minute final film in collaboration with a film production company (Singleton worked with Treetop Films, based in Caerphilly, Wales).
- 6 Although my recent European Research Council grant provided funding for *Natura Urbana* two out of the six reviewers raised reservations about using film as a research output. One reviewer stated: “What is not entirely clear to me and should be discussed if the proposal is approved, is to what extent a documentary film can contribute in ways that more traditional ways of dissemination of academic results cannot” whilst the other sceptical reviewer raised reservations about the “film-making skills of the PI, which does not appear clearly in the application.”
- 7 On collaborative modes of editing see Richardson-Ngwenya (2012) and Sarria-Sanz et al. (2024).
- 8 On the use of sonic ethnographies to explore landscape change see also Neto and Korkmaz (2024).
- 9 For *Natura Urbana* it turned out that rights would not be granted to use the music of Kraftwerk so I asked our sound designer Jonathan Schorr to compose some music for us in a similar kind of electronic style to accompany the “Natur oder Beton/Nature or concrete” chapter.
- 10 In some cases, specialist equipment is needed for just one shot: we used a crane rather than a drone, for example, to film the rooftops of the Friedrichshagen water works in *Natura Urbana*.
- 11 At the time of writing some 35 higher education institutions across the United Kingdom have been making significant cuts to arts and humanities programmes.
- 12 Examples include Baptiste (2016), Ernwein (2022), Gandy (2021), Garrett (2010), Paiva (2018), and Simpson (2011).

Bibliography

- Akomfrah, J. (2015) ‘Black independent filmmaking: a statement by the black audio film collective’, *Black Camera: An International Film Journal (The New Series)*, 6(2), pp. 58–60.
- Anthias, P. (2024) ‘Countertopographies and the futures of geographical thought’, *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 14(2), pp. 221–225.
- Balsom, E. and Peleg, H. (2016) ‘Introduction: the documentary attitude’, in Balsom, E. and Peleg, H. (eds.) *Documentary across disciplines*. Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 10–19.
- Banks, M. and Ruby, J. (eds.) (2011) *Made to be seen: perspectives on the history of visual anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Baptiste, A.K. (2016) ‘Can a research film be considered a stand-alone academic publication? An assessment of the film *climate change, voices of the vulnerable: The fishers’ plight*’, *Area*, 48(4), pp. 463–471.
- Barbash, I. and Taylor, L. (eds.) (1997) *Cross-cultural filmmaking: a handbook for making documentary and ethnographic films and videos*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Basu, P. (2008) *Reframing ethnographic film*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Bathla, N. and Papanicolaou, K.E. (2022) ‘Reframing the contested city through ethnographic film: beyond the expository on housing and the urban’, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 22(3), pp. 351–370.
- Bloom, P.J. (2008) *French colonial documentary: mythologies of humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dias, J.P. (2022) ‘Environmental thinking and Indigenous arts in Brazil today’, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 31(1), pp. 141–157.
- Elsaesser, T. (2004) ‘The new film history as media archaeology’, *Cinemas*, 14(2), pp. 75–117.
- Ernwein, M. (2019). Attentive observation and the cinematic imagination. An interview with Matthew Gandy. *Revue française des méthodes visuelles* [En ligne], 3 | 2019, mis en ligne le 5 juillet 2019, consulté le 08/02/2025. <https://rfmv.fr>
- Ernwein, M. (2022) ‘Filmic geographies: audio-visual, embodied-material’, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 23(6), pp. 779–796.

- Fallon, K. (2019) *Where truth lies: digital culture and documentary media after 9/11*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fedunski, M. (2003) 'Malaria films: motion pictures as a public health tool', *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(7), pp. 1046–1057.
- Franceschelli, M. and Galipo, A. (2021) 'The use of film documentary in social science research: audio-visual accounts of the 'migration crisis' from the Italian island of Lampedusa', *Visual Studies*, 36(1), pp. 38–50.
- Furuhata, Y. (2013) *Cinema of actuality: Japanese avant-garde filmmaking in the season of image politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gallagher, M. (2015) 'Sounding ruins: reflections on the production of an 'audio drift'', *cultural geographies*, 22(3), pp. 467–485.
- Gandy, M. (2009) 'Liquid city: reflections on making a film', *cultural geographies*, 16(3), pp. 403–408.
- Gandy, M. (2021) 'Film as method in the geohumanities', *GeoHumanities*, 7(2), pp. 605–624.
- Garrett, B. (2010) 'Videographic geographies: using digital video for geographic research', *Progress in Human Geography*, 35(4), pp. 521–541.
- Hawkins, H. (2019) 'Geography's creative (re) turn: toward a critical framework', *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(6), pp. 963–984.
- Heider, K. (2009) *Ethnographic film*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Holland, E.C. (2020) 'The anti-geopolitical cinematic eye: documentary film and critical geopolitics', *Geography Compass*, 14(10), p. e12536.
- Inoue, M. (2019) 'The ethics of representation in light of Minamata disease: Tsuchimoto Noriaki and his Minamata documentaries', *Arts*, 8(1), p. 37.
- Jackson, E. (2010) 'The eyes of Agnès Varda: portraiture, cinécriture and the filmic ethnographic eye', *Feminist Review*, 96(1), pp. 122–126.
- Jacobs, J. (2016) 'Filmic geographies: The rise of digital film as a research method and output', *Area*, 48(4), pp. 452–454.
- Jacobs, J. (2024) 'Making space for film with film geographies', *Academic Quarter|Akademisk kvarter*, 27, pp. 96–112.
- Jameson, F. (1992) *The geopolitical aesthetic: cinema and space in the world system*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Lawton, P., Till, K.E., Jasper, S., Vasudevan, A., Dümpelmann, S., Flitner, M., Beach, M., Nash, C. and Gandy, M. (2019) 'Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin', *The AAG Review of Books*, 7(3), pp. 214–227.
- Louson, E. (2021) 'Performing authenticity: the making-of documentary in wildlife film's blue-chip renaissance', *People and Nature*, 3(6), pp. 1147–1159.
- MacDougall, D. (2019) *The looking machine. Essays on cinema, anthropology and documentary filmmaking*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.
- McCreary, T. and Murnaghan, A.M.F. (2020) 'Remixed methodologies in community-based film research', *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien*, 64(4), pp. 576–589.
- Minh-Ha, T.T. (1990). 'Documentary is/not a name', *October*, 52, pp. 77–98.
- Neto, P.F. and Korkmaz, B. (2024) 'Guadiana in four movements', *cultural geographies*, 32(2), 14744740241293108.
- Paiva, D. (2018) 'Sonic geographies: themes, concepts, and deaf spots', *Geography Compass*, 12(7), p. e12375.
- Pink, S. (2011) *Doing visual ethnography*. Third edition. London: Sage.
- Rich, B.R. (2006) 'Documentary disciplines: an introduction', *Cinema Journal*, 46(1), pp. 108–115.
- Richardson-Ngweny, P. (2012) 'The affective ethics of participatory video: an exploration of inter-personal encounters', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 11(2), pp. 250–281.
- Rogers, C., Gough-Brady, C. and Berry, M. (2022) 'Breathing places: three filmmaking investigations', *cultural geographies*, 29(1), pp. 99–113.
- Sarria-Sanz, C., Alencar, A. and Verhoeven, E. (2024) 'Using participatory video for co-production and collaborative research with refugees: critical reflections from the digital place-makers program', *Learning, Media and Technology*, 49(2), pp. 306–319.
- Simpson, P. (2011) 'So, as you can see ...': some reflections on the utility of video methodologies in the study of embodied practices', *Area*, 43(3), pp. 343–352.

- Singleton, A. (2024) 'Urban research in film using walking tours and psychogeographic approaches', *Visual Studies*, 39(1–2), pp. 184–195.
- Smith, A. (1998) *Agnès Varda*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Thieme, S. (2012) "'Action": publishing research results in film', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 13(1).
- Thieme, S., Eyer, P. and Vorbrugg, A. (2019) 'Film VerORTen: Film als Forschungs- und Kommunikationsmedium in der Geographie', *Geographica Helvetica*, 74(4), pp. 293–297.
- Wollen, P. (1972[1969]) *Signs and meanings in the cinema*. Third edition. London: Secker and Warburg.