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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7817>
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

« J. M. Gratale on Jane Chapman's *Issues in Contemporary Documentary* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2010-1, document 1, Online since 04 March 2010, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7817>

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- 1 Jane Chapman, *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*. Polity Press, 2009. pp. 210 ISBN: 978-0-7456-4009-9.
- 2 The prevalence of images in contemporary society and culture is a patent reality. From digital photography to cinematic film, and cell phone imaging to You Tube, the production and circulation of the image is becoming more and more diffused. In conjunction with such developments is the fact that the mediums and technologies which 'deliver' these images are constantly diversifying and improving in capabilities. Where does all this leave the documentary? Has the documentary outgrown its appeal in a market consumed with reality TV programming, news and surveillance footage, and Hollywood 3-D blockbuster films? This book by Jane Chapman represents a timely engagement with a range of issues intimately linked to the documentary genre. While she does not directly address the growing appeal of the multifarious visual mediums mentioned above, Chapman makes a compelling case that contemporary documentary occupies a vital space in the global social milieu of the present.
- 3 In under two-hundred pages Chapman competently assesses the state of current documentary film practice. The range of issues she addresses include the following: definitions of relevant terminology, modes of representation, the tension between objectivity and subjectivity, censorship, the authorial voice, reflexivity, audience response, and questions relating to ethics. Each of these areas forms the individual chapters which comprise the book in addition to an introduction and a concluding section. While it is essentially an introductory volume, Chapman's methodology and the book's content reveals something much more which I would identify as the hidden strengths of *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*. For example, one of the 'necessities' of an introductory text is to provide an historical backdrop for the subject matter at hand. So the reader might assume a chapter or two of Chapman's book would be devoted to the historical evolution of the documentary genre over the past hundred years or so. The author, however, avoids this formulaic convention and in its place opts to incorporate historical context relevant to specific thematic issues. As she indicates, she has "used

documentary history selectively to explain context rather than attempt to present an all-embracing chronological evolution" (2).

- 4 In place of a historically oriented discourse, Chapman utilizes a number of case studies. These case studies, or documentary vignettes, give the book a highly appealing quality and provide an insight into contemporary documentary practices at the international level. From documentaries which deal with 9/11 to the war in Iraq, and issues of sexuality and gender to anthropologically focused treatments, Chapman's case studies not only contextualize particular themes, but also provide the reader some access to various theoreticians and their theoretical perspectives. These theoretical insights coupled with critical analyses of selected documentaries provide a much needed interpretive dimension to the book. For example, the author considers the 2007 conspiracy documentary *Zeitgeist*. After a brief summary and helpful commentary from other authors, Chapman identifies the key weaknesses of the documentary. Her comments are effective and to the point. In the case of *Zeitgeist*, she states the following: the "legitimate questions about what happened on 9/11, and about corruption in financial and religious organizations, are all undermined by the film's determined effort to maximize an emotional response at the expense of reasoned argument" (173). This sort of focused analysis clarifies and illustrates the theoretical underpinnings of the book, and provides the reader with ample exposure to the application of theory.
- 5 Another intriguing aspect of Chapman's volume is its sustained engagement with questions relating to a documentary's intent and purpose. For example, the issue of *truth* and its depiction in a documentary comes up repeatedly throughout the work. Her handling of such matters is that "the camera is incapable of simply delivering an unmediated reproduction of truth: the camera is by definition an instrument of visual mediation" (23). Mediation and the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy are central for the documentary genre. Common public understanding seems to assume that a documentary is a *factual* depiction of an event, issue, or personality which is somehow 'objectively' represented as one might view journalistic investigative reporting. Chapman reiterates over and over that the *constructed* elements of a documentary require acknowledgement. As she argues, any "suggestion that documentary provides an unmediated reflection of the real world should be challenged: images provide evidence of the real world as a subjective interpretation in the same way that a painting or piece of writing does..." (27). Therefore, an inherent *tension* exists within documentary film-making which is less of an issue in other similar mediated visual forms.
- 6 This problematic (or tension) is perhaps responsible for the continued appeal of documentary; and this takes us to one further strength of the book. Chapman successfully manages to incorporate the advances and developments of the digital revolution and illuminate its linkage to documentary practices. Essentially Chapman suggests that documentary is "alive and well" in the early twenty-first century despite the proliferation of alternate forms of visual culture. In fact what has been occurring is an increased ability to create a 'documentary' and have it circulate through the Internet, bypassing the conventional institutional configuration of documentary production. For example, through uploading and downloading on the Internet, the genre, some would argue, has become more democratized. The contemporary visual landscape is more and more becoming comprised of social-activist oriented documentaries. As Chapman points out, the "emergence of cheaper and more flexible technology allows anybody to make a documentary, to edit their films quickly, and to promote them on the Internet" (71).

- 7 The new mediums in which documentary is formatted and the platforms in which they are consumed clearly represent an aspect of *change* in the genre. But as Chapman warns the reader, there is an equally strong current of *continuity* in documentary film-making along the thematic lines discussed throughout her work including the authorial voice, audience response, objectivity/subjectivity, ethics, as well as other related issues. And just as these discursive tensions were a key characteristic in the past and continue to be in the present, so too will they remain in the future. Chapman's book thus performs a very critical function in bridging past and present while simultaneously noting not only the overlapping redundancies of documentary practices, but also accounting for its breaks and discontinuities. Therefore, any reader who is interested in an informed analysis and scholarly account of contemporary documentary should not hesitate to consult this impressive volume by Jane Chapman.

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