

BEYOND STORY \  
AN ONLINE, COMMUNITY-BASED MANIFESTO  
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We are practitioners and scholars drawn to documentary because of its potential to intervene in the dominant consensus of the perceived world. We need documentary. We need it to help interpret the world. We use documentary. We use it as artists, as viewers, and as activists to help us imagine new ways to engage with the world. We rely on documentary, in all of its eclectic variety, to record, trouble, explain, reveal, and share lived reality and our plans and hopes to transform it.

We met as AIDS activist video-makers in the 1980s, both drawn to documentary for its agitational, educational, and community-building potentials, as well as its power to disrupt the hegemonic biopolitics of the day. Separately, we have continued to work in documentary around a range of issues—from revolutionary Arab media to feminist queer families—our approaches and tactics also ranging as we strive, variously, to educate, agitate, self-represent, and connect. As students and teachers of documentary history we are keen admirers of its tremendous range of expressivity. We know that documentary has many organizing logics suited for specific times and places. Documentary comes in many forms. In times of trouble, we need all of its great range.

Indeed, we are drawn to documentary for its insurrectionary possibilities and its activist and engaged orientations. Just as—and because—we resist by using documentary, documentary resists generic and formal categorization. It must be adaptive to be most useful. And so, form matters. Documentary form shapes ways of thinking and seeing, just as it emerges from and shapes ideological assumptions. Politics and form are inextricably intertwined. One does not exist without the other.

“Story”—today’s ubiquitous mantra, structure, telos, and mind-set—is only one of the many powerful forms of documentary. Yes: great works of documentary have been shaped into fabulous stories; human beings are inspired by a well-told tale; yarns have moved men and mountains. But storytelling is not the most or only effective form for documentary, as affecting as it can be. Not everything should be molded into a story, not everyone fits its constricting contours nor finds their most meaningful incantation in its familiar

folds. There are many ways to shape a documentary. And yet, despite this self-evident claim, “storytelling” currently dominates the field.

Of course, storytelling can mean many things. But most story-driven docs come in a one-size-fits-all framework that is built to neatly hold a compelling cast of characters in their clear and coherent world. While there are endless ways to tell stories —disruptive, dialogic, non-linear, creative—we want to participate in a documentary culture that moves beyond projects that rely centrally upon two things: 1) a small number of recognizable characters around whom feelings are generated, primarily by way of identification and cathexis, humanism and empathy, and; 2) said characters’ actions being arranged through a set of recognizable spatial/temporal templates that cohere only nominally to lived reality given that they are arranged through a cause-effect logic that does not remotely resemble reality as it is experienced.

**We are not against story per se. We are against the privileging of story as the most viable or supported organizing principle for documentary, especially at the very moment that documentary is poised to liberate itself from its narrative moorings.** It is crucial to think beyond story; to learn from and/or imagine other organizing principles that may have a greater force. We urge filmmakers, funders, programmers, viewers, and scholars to look beyond story and to other forms of documentary; to ask why storytelling has become today’s pre-eminent mode for documentary and what gets lost when storied structures prevail.

When did story become king? At the very moment when there were profits to maximize.<sup>1</sup> The millennial successes of documentary at the box office—and its many linked screens—has enabled a pressure, as well as baseline assumption, that “story” is the right or only approach to the form. This prevailing view supports documentaries that resemble and function like mainstream fiction films. Just as Hollywood simplified the expansive potential for narrative to streamline all realms of efficiency in its heyday, documentary (and reality-based content more generally) has been saddled with a copy-cat

form that economically pleases audiences, distribution mechanisms, owners, and makers.

This dominant mode of cinematic storytelling—developed to serve commercial interests—privileges individuals over collectivities, people over their environments, human will over systemic forces, and in terms of spectatorship, feelings over analysis and passivity over action. Even when its protagonists are non-human, anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism reign. Storied narratives require heroic characters and their neatly linked conflicts and resolutions. This individualistic ideology naturalizes bourgeois values and the economic system that supports them. Similarly, the nearly exclusive corralling of documentary resources in the direction of storytelling, regardless of (or perhaps due to) its lofty humanistic aims, aligns just as neatly with our epoch’s neoliberal logics of labor, self, and capital and thus with corporate models for media culture, engagement, and citizenship. Expressed through funding mechanisms, distribution and exhibition circuits, ever-expanding industries, and certain well-lauded, influential films, one little word, “story,” suddenly carries the day. Story has all the appeal, as well as the liabilities, of an artistic or industrial common sense. But common sense is not to be trusted, it is to be interrogated (perhaps through documentaries!).

Ironically, just as documentary locks into this commercial viability and structural common-sense, we note concurrent developments in technology allowing documentary to easily shed its boundedness to linearity, and relatedly, to story, thereby opening up new spheres for reality-based expression. However, the first decade of the interactive or digital documentary doggedly follows the market driven logic that has only recently fastened to the field of feature documentary. Story is being trumpeted in both realms, with a wanton disregard of other formats, methods, histories, commitments, pleasures, and possibilities.

At best this is a missed opportunity not too late to correct. At worst, however, it is a misplaced conservatism or an unexamined facet of

a seamless neoliberal ideology in lockstep with market forces.

Forms are cultural, political, and ethical commitments in their own right. We believe there is a social obligation to challenge received forms and to celebrate the process of finding form in the formless and formlessness in the form. Cameras film things as they are happening. People experience the world in real time, but also in felt time. Reality often feels unmoored, confusing, unstoried, especially when experienced in crisis. In other moments, it seems difficult to separate historical reality from the many forms, including story, that have been imposed upon it. While cinema can provide one remedy for the human need to create causal sense, it can also resist, embellish, complicate, or mirror this lack. For instance, there are documentary forms that run outside of structures of capitalist accumulation, subjective pleasure, ease, or comfort, or even a desire for rational sense.

Documentaries are built through countless structures that have reached beyond or bypass story, each bound to diverse imperatives. This is nothing new. Our manifesto describes some of these modes but more critically seeks conversation about documentary's many formats. We are interested in attending to the full range of approaches that have been refined over the course of media history as well as the exciting and innovative adaptations of these structures that can be part of a response using new technologies and in conversation with the dominant logics of our day.

For instance, documentaries can prioritize spatial, graphic, interactive, atemporal, aesthetic, and abstract associations. They can be motivated by inquiry, using experimentation and open-ended analysis to express associative logics and a heterogeneous relationship to genre. They can also be pedagogically oriented, using styles of persuasion closely associated with the academic, journalistic, or third person essay, proposing a clear argument.

With the advent of interactive non-linear platforms, open-ended structures become easier to render. Database or archival documentaries

organize a collection of materials that can be created, found, arranged, and stored by others, or by the filmmaker herself. A host of organizational logics can inform this collecting, housing, saving, and sharing. Meanwhile, some documentaries are made, organized, and grown by many—people, institutions, or machines—challenging notions of single-authorship. These may attempt at control or coherence, but they can just as easily flow—often with little human effort—across and between platforms, places, and singular entities or systems. Some docs prioritize the wisdom, holdings, feelings, and aims of the multitude.

Still other documentaries foreground technology's abilities to hold onto the world: to hear, observe, and preserve. Whether looking at or knowing the other self, world, or ideas, these documentaries strive to witness, encounter, or record the unfolding of space and time, and to then share this with others. Ethical and political considerations for this attentive, mechanical gaze often become paramount, taking account of filmmakers' power and that of the cinematic apparatus much more so than any commitment to story. Finally, documentarians are empowered by technology's capacities to look, hear, and know what falls outside of human sensory and cognitive systems. Whether their concern is the material world or the inaccessible regimes of self or other, metaphysics or the infinitely small or large systems that surround us, documentarians can use technologies like animation, automation, algorithms, or other prostheses to extend knowledge and engagement beyond the human body.

Our manifesto hopes to intervene in a new consensus in the field of documentary. We hope to pry open more of the great potential of documentary at a moment when it feels at risk of being closed down, the very same moment when the world opens outward and destabilizes newly, in relation to climate, migration, authoritarianism, global corporate media, neo-capitalism and other impending catastrophes. We need forms of documentary that seek to rupture the self-satisfied logics that normalize the current state of affairs; we need forms

that do not feed upon and into the colossal denial that allows this state of affairs to continue.

To intervene in perceptual and sensible reckonings—how the social world is perceived and understood—documentary must avail itself of all its mighty methods of organization. We trust and know that stories will emerge on their own. But if we can expand beyond story as the dominant organizing principle of twenty-first century documentary, we stand poised to encounter—and make use of—infinately open-ended, expansive, and explosive alternatives. Documentary may never look the same.

We write this manifesto primarily for documentary practitioners and the industry that supports them. We believe that critics and scholars can be of key support by contributing our knowledge of the variegated history of documentary theory, style, and method. We also know that documentarians can offer new forms that work. We ask our readers to join this effort by contributing examples of reality-based meaning-making, beyond story, that allow documentary to do some of its best, most arresting work in hard times. These alternatives should be of particular use for filmmakers and activists who are trying to intervene in their lived political realities. In such troubled times, we are most roused by and in need of documentary that can learn from and contribute to developments of form and format.

Thus, we offer our manifesto online as one example of an expansion, allowing for your contributions, collaboration, and/or contestation. Add films, old and new, to our growing database: examples of documentaries that go beyond story. Build upon our claims, or if you prefer, refute them in the established writing streams. We hope for our manifesto to create options, thinking, and action. Hence, after a year online, and a set of linked events, we will revisit and then revise the manifesto to take account of all we have learned through our documentary community's interventions. We will publish the rewrite of our manifesto in *World Records* as part of a special issue that pulls together records of the events we built

beyond story, the films and filmmakers we learned from, and your thoughtful additions and contestations of our bold claims herein.

#### NEXT STEPS:

We invite you to contribute in a variety of ways to this intervention. There are seven streams of interaction built into the online version of this manifesto. You can add examples of films and/or modes of documentary structure to our growing conversation about alternatives to story. You can write your thoughts that build on our argument or, if you wish, contest it. We will make use of these contributions to rewrite the manifesto for a special issue of *World Records* in 2020. Throughout this year, we will also hold a series of live events where invited artists and scholars will add their voices, films, and theories "beyond story." Records of these, too, will be included in the special issue.

#### ENDNOTES

1—According to IMDB, 13 of the 20 top grossing documentaries of all time were made from 2000 onward. According to Box office Mojo, all of the 10 top grossing documentaries in the US were made in the 2000s. Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) tops both lists at \$119.19m. "Documentary (Sorted by US Box Office Descending)," IMDB website, <https://www.google.com/search?q=imdb+top+grossing+documentaries&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-ab> and <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>

fig 1.1



Feeding America Advertisement, New York City, November 2018, Feedingamerica.org