Introduction

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The documentary field is arguably one of the most vibrant, challenging and creative areas in moving images today. In countries with well-established film and television industries, documentary production has been considerably revitalised since the late 1980s. From this period onwards, new distribution opportunities through specialised TV channels and circulation in both international film festivals and theatres have steadily ensured the vitality of both documentary TV programmes and feature-length documentaries. Simultaneously, the globalisation and popularisation of video and digital technologies around the world, and the concomitant development of video practices outside conventional cinema, have transformed the documentary form into a common means of creation and expression. This new surge of interest in documentary practices and forms can be partially explained by easier access not only to cheaper and more user-friendly technology, but also to new distribution platforms, and it has resulted in the emergence of truly innovative documentary movements and breakthroughs by new filmmakers or artists embracing the documentary as an art form, mode of enquiry and work method.

While pursuing our respective research on Indian and Chinese contemporary documentary films, we came to realise that despite local disparities, both countries – and many places around the world – were confronting this general context and the correlated advent of new types of documentaries, which often claim to be ‘independent’ art forms or means of expression. These filmmakers’ work methods and ethics, their modes of organisation and in particular the creation of autonomous structures and documentary events, their difficulties and,
at times, their filmic styles gave us enough ground for comparative discussion to conceive of this collection of essays. The ‘independent’ documentary images that we associate with this worldwide phenomenon include the works of filmmakers, artists, activists, journalists, ordinary citizens and anonymous online content, and document all sorts of events, from the genocide in Cambodia to the political dictatorship in Chile, the unrest across the Arab world to the Occupy movements around the globe. However, to our knowledge, academic publications seldom identify significant similarities between heterogeneous documentary practices and forms, which often remain overshadowed by their categorisation in terms of format, medium and terminal (film, video, TV channels, web, mobile and so forth), genres (creative documentary, documentary video art, activist film, citizen reportage, web documentary), subject matter and place of origin. Drawing from such first-hand observation, this collective volume sets out to draw attention to these similarities by offering in-depth analyses of significant independent documentary works in the post-1990 era. Concurrently, the case studies also reveal that this ‘independence’ incorporates a large variety of viewpoints, work methods, industrial and commercial strategies, content and styles.

EMBRACING A VAST ARRAY OF PRACTICES

Among these manifold practices, amateur filmmaking has actively contributed to the recent diversification of the documentary. Documentaries have grown more ubiquitous with the advancement of portable film and video cameras in the twentieth century, and the recent digital turn has brought another crucial development – that of instant editing and sharing, and the subsequent emergence of a ‘conversational use of images’ (Gunthert 2014). While documentary has always been at the centre of amateur practices (in family and holiday films, and occasionally in more ‘serious’ matters), with the popularisation of DV and mobile phones, amateurs produce even more images of their daily life. Often criticised as exhibitionist and self-centred practices emanating from a society obsessed with exterior signs of happiness (Buckingham and Willett 2009; Goggin 2006; Hodkinson 2010), these digital amateur documentary images have at the same time been hailed as empowering gestures leading to democratic transitions, because instead of being confined to the memory trove of their producer, they are able to circulate widely, generate debate and sometimes trigger political action (Howard and Hussain 2013; Kamalipour 2010; Wilson and Dunn 2011). In her book on British amateur film, Heather Norris Nicholson recasts ‘amateur film and video practice as direct visual antecedents to the mimetic processes of today’ (2012: 246). She warns us not to overlook the social aspects pertaining to this type of filmmaking, and her
historical research reveals how ‘earlier dismissive treatment of amateur activity as parochial and limited in content now seems misleading’ (246). To a large extent, scholarly interest in amateur documentary images and their potential to foster social change seems acknowledged today, partly due to their transformation in scale, from a largely private practice to a worldwide phenomenon. Similarly, by showing the porous limits between amateurs and prominent figures in documentary filmmaking such as Peter Watkins – we could also add in a different category Jonas Mekas – Nicholson highlights possible shifts from anonymous amateur practices to authorship, something that, in turn, needs to be addressed today in the light of these recent practices (see also Fox 2004). New perspectives on this question may very well arise from approaches that overcome differences and reveal significant analogies, instead of working along artificial or outdated lines of distinction.

The independent documentarists’ drive towards the unique freedom attached to amateur status shows that independence cannot be analysed without taking into account the wider issue of free speech as a fundamental right, and thus the complex relationship between filmmakers (or artists in general) and ruling political systems. However, creative freedom remains an objective to be achieved as modes of control remain pervasive around the globe, whether from state censors, lobbyist groups acting on ideological or religious convictions, free market regulations, technical limitations or even self-censorship resulting from all sorts of real and imaginary pressures. Censoring measures can take on more or less coercive forms, from conditional funding to script control, ratings, imposed cuts and bans, depending on the specific local context. Thus, being an independent documentary maker, producer, distributor or exhibitor seems to refer to a political commitment against these various forms and levels of constraint, which are all connected, to various extents, to the larger issue of censorship. As the book intends to demonstrate, independence is at best a relative achievement, and ultimately independent documentary productions intersect with different modes of control in multiple ways. In the increasing number of countries driven by the liberal model of market economy since 1990, and beyond legal battles to defend freedom, censorship has also become an efficient instrument of the commodification of culture (Bhownik 2009). Therefore, despite local disparities, independent documentaries share a common resistance against (or challenge to) state control, free market-driven economy and conservative social norms and their watchdog organisations.

In India, for instance, the state has created several instruments of film control (see Chapter 3). Under pressure from the ruling government, documentaries dealing with politically sensitive issues can be refused certification and thus be banned from public exhibition on television, in movie theatres and in state-sponsored film festivals. The state also exercises some control over the funding and distribution of documentaries through various
public organisations (including the Public Service Broadcasting Trust, Films Division, Doordarshan TV network and Mumbai International Film Festival, as well as various ministries and official agencies). However, the 1990s have placed this efficient set of official control apparatuses under growing strain, forcing their representatives to free up space for independent documentary expression. Economic liberalisation and the concomitant satellite TV revolution have ended the monopoly of Films Division and public broadcaster Doordarshan, allowing non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private and individual documentary production and distribution to develop. This evolution accelerated after 2000, when the opening of new independent exhibition places (film festivals, art galleries, online distribution) started to make censor certificates obsolete. These economic and technological improvements also influenced the evolution of Indian mentalities. For instance, despite lengthy legal battles, high court decisions usually favour the rights of filmmakers over state bans or restrictions, as in the case of Anand Patwardhan, Tapan Bose, Suhashini Mullay and Rakesh Sharma.

Although this new environment seems to benefit free creative and artistic expression, contemporary documentary filmmakers continue to face serious challenges. Post-1990 India has been marked by intensified communalism and tensions with Pakistan. Independent filmmakers were eager to document these sensitive issues, which immediately fell under the strict scrutiny of the state at a time when the Hindu nationalist party (Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]) was rising and finally governed the country (from 1998 to 2004). This government justified its strict censorship policy in the name of national security and public order following the deadly anti-Muslim riots at the Babri Masjid in Bihar (1992) and later in Gujarat (2002). However, it mainly covered the strong anti-Muslim drive revealed by these films, official recognition of which could have led to international outrage and sanctions. Although such documentaries faced bans for several years after their release (Bombay’s Blood Yatra dir. Suma Josson, 1992; In the Name of God dir. Anand Patwardhan, 1992; Chords on the Richter Scale dir. Shyam Rajanakar, 2001; Aakrosh dir. Ramesh Pimple, 2003; Final Solution dir. Rakesh Sharma, 2003 and others), they all won their legal cases before the high court. The judges openly opposed the decision of the Censor Board and emphasised the positive impact of the films, which they claimed delivered a ‘message of peace and coexistence and compassion for the people who suffered in the riots’ (Bhownik 2009: 300). This is only one of many examples of the contradictions arising from different state representatives on the issue of censorship. Another instance is the national awards honouring these same oppositional documentaries banned from public exhibition (such as Tapan Bose and Suhashini Mulay’s An Indian Story and Bhopal: Beyond Genocide in 1982 and 1987, and Anand Patwardhan’s War and Peace in 2003). This situation demonstrates both the state’s ambiguous
position on controversial sociopolitical matters and its possible evolution from a conservative to a more open-minded approach to issues of cultural control, as well as the question of the film’s influence on public opinion in the digital era. This gradual open-mindedness, if confirmed, would also modify the meaning of ‘independence’ for Indian documentary practitioners, who would not necessarily have to position themselves vis-à-vis official apparatuses any longer. In fact, over the past ten years, a majority of documentary filmmakers have been ignoring the instruments of state control and screening their films in newly available spaces (independent film festivals, cultural centres, art galleries, online distribution platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo) without being cleared by the Central Board of Film Certification. This recent strategy of political defiance also contributes to a pragmatic evolution on the part of the government, which is forced to reposition itself, in order to save face and maintain its legitimacy in the eyes of the general public. Elsewhere, pragmatic and ambiguous relations with censorship representatives are also at work and thus question the very usefulness of the notion of ‘independence’.

PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY

Before delving into this question, it should be acknowledged that in addition to their strong connections to the ‘digital revolution’, all of these documentary images try, to varying extents, to position themselves towards censorship and overcome the lack of visibility of certain issues in the mainstream media. Thus, they reflect upon the notion of truth – as defined by conventional, commercial or official productions – by experimenting with the status of the enunciator, participatory practices and live recording, and by adopting or inventing new image production, distribution and exhibition strategies. Reflecting on their status and identity, practitioners have adopted various ways of defining themselves over the past two decades. While some claim their independent stance, others conceal, internalise or simply ignore it. Instead, some may refer to other terms to qualify their practice according to local specificities, ideological beliefs and other collective or individual factors. Puzzling and imprecise as it may be for scholars, this variety of terminologies should not minimise the existence of a general and obvious community of practitioners, the similarities between their works or the parallels between these independent documentary movements.

In film studies, the notion of ‘independence’ has been defined in different ways according to specific historical, geographical, political, economic, social and cultural contexts. In the United States, it was understood first in economic terms, and then as an alternative to the Hollywood studio system, to describe film professionals developing their own styles, personal sociopolitical views...
and distinctive production, distribution and exhibition strategies outside the main studios (Andrew 1998; Davies 1981; Hall 2000; Holmlund and Wyatt 2004; Levy 2001; Lewis 1998; Mendick and Schneider 2002). More interestingly, other publications emphasise the complex professional and aesthetic interconnections between these alternative films and Hollywood, and the fact that independent productions often develop within the remits of the mainstream studio system (Balio 1987; King 2005, 2009; King et al. 2012; Merritt 1999; Murray 2011; Tzioumakis 2012). Elsewhere, however, this classic definition does not necessarily apply. In France, for instance, the film and television industry operates in close relation to the state, which funds and regulates it. In China, in the absence of a private film sector (progressively made possible by the late 1970s Reforms), documentary production and circulation was the monopoly of state studios until the 1990s, whereas in India, over the same period, art and documentary cinemas were largely confined to the control of government organisations. In such cases, ‘independent film’ seems to refer to films produced and screened outside national film institutions, a definition that often bears a connotation of political resistance or opposition to mainstream media and state discourses, or else a distinct film aesthetic. But what about countries where film production is so scarce that the mainstream film industry does not even exist? This is the case in most sub-Saharan countries, where decolonisation has not yet triggered the development of a sustained film and television industry able to provide sufficient mainstream images against which to position oneself. In most cases, the production of feature-length fiction or documentary films faces many logistical and practical obstacles, requires tremendous local effort and tenacity, and very often requires the collaboration of agents from other national film industries, such as co-producers or funding and promotional events organisers (pitching forums, writing residencies and the like). Although launched in 1969 in Burkina Faso, FESPACO, the largest film and television festival in Africa, is still largely funded and supported by donations from Europe, Asia and United Nations agencies. Recently, joint initiatives between European and local African structures have helped practitioners develop documentary projects, but in the absence of strong domestic industries, their productions remain dependent on foreign funding and circulation networks.

Beyond the issue of external influence on the shaping of an ‘African cinema’ according to international rather than local standards and expectations, the very question of a cinema’s ‘nationality’ becomes vague when film structures and people from diverse countries cooperate on the same project. A transnational cinema seems to be a valid answer to this issue of belonging in a globalised world, and to the limitation of nationality as a framework for film studies (Hjort and Mackenzie 2000; Hunt and Leung 2008; Kauer and Sinha 2005; Nestingen and Elkington 2005; Zhang 2009). Specific circumstances can crucially raise
this issue, as in the case of Palestinian films. ‘Emerging as a stateless cinema of the most serious national consequences’ (Dabashi 2006: 11), Palestinian films are often not recognised as such in major film festivals, and most of those making it to the international scene benefit heavily from foreign funding (which, as argued earlier, constitutes a form of dependency). In a different context, Taiwanese filmmakers share a comparable, yet more fortunate fate. If the Taiwanese film industry has proven its stability, specificity and creativity, its identity is occasionally threatened on the international scene. Unrecognised by the United Nations, the island is considered a renegade province by the People’s Republic of China, and the terminology used for Taiwanese films in international festivals confuses organisers and audiences alike, while pressure is usually exerted behind the scenes to label them as ‘Chinese/Taiwanese’. Other complex national and international restrictions can be found in India, where separatist movements occur in several provinces, such as in Kashmir, Punjab, Jharkhand, Mizoram and Assam. Given the state’s minimisation of such oppositional voices, documentaries dealing with this sensitive issue are predictably scarce in national film festivals and public broadcasting, but are likewise seldom promoted by international film selections and foreign TV channels, which prefer to focus on generic, ‘exoticised’ and therefore stereotyped representations of the country, from the ‘inhumane’ caste system and other local customs to the ‘eternally spiritual’ and ‘non-violent’ India. Hence, in some places, (documentary) filmmaking can be, in itself, an act of resistance and a declaration of independence against powers that relentlessly try to muffle legitimate national voices and dissenting identities.

More than merely highlighting identity issues, reliance on foreign-based film industries or structures through informal collaborations, subventions, co-productions and the like tends to somehow undermine the author’s discourse as irrelevant or opportunistic. The reception of Chinese independent films in the 1990s and 2000s by the media and film scholars alike testifies to the difficulty of positioning oneself after achieving worldwide recognition, while occasionally enduring drastic domestic constraints. The ‘independent’ label often proves controversial in such circumstances, and as the reasons for the adoption of this label are sometimes misconstrued as overt dissent, the filmmakers’ agendas are often read in simplistic political terms. Applied interchangeably by the media and distributors with other terms such as ‘underground’ or alongside a rhetoric of ‘dissidence’, ‘independent’ has become, for some film professionals, a ‘meaningless label save for marketing and academic purposes, or to “lionise” independent films’ (Li et al. 2010). Hence, to be considered ‘authentic’ when working as an independent film practitioner and experiencing success on the international film scene can prove very difficult. However, despite such discussions on the worldwide reception of local independent talents, the reshaping of the film industry and festival circuit calls for
multinational collaborations and the circulation of works that are essential to vulnerable film forms, such as, but not only, the documentary.

The confrontation of these two phenomena – the identity crisis faced by filmmakers whose nationality causes problems, and the growing transnationality of the film production process – has generated a film category aptly defined by Hamid Naficy as ‘accented cinema’ (Naficy 2001). These ‘exilic and diasporic films’ (3) are ‘by no means an established or cohesive cinema’ (4), but ‘are fundamentally “critical” . . . for they are often non-commercial and usually artisanal and collective in their production’ (45). In some respects, Naficy’s definition cannot but strike us as being incredibly close to the film category we try to define, especially in its ‘interstitiality’ – a mode of operation ‘located at the intersection of the local and the global’ (46), where actors operate ‘both within and astride the cracks of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies, and heterogeneity’ (46). Many independent documentary filmmakers will recognise themselves in the characteristics Naficy enumerates: financing difficulties, accumulation of labour, self-inscription, authorship forced by constraints, distribution delays and so forth. Indeed, when they manage to enter the professional film sector, such films are supported by companies that create ‘crossover audiences by cross-listing and cross-packaging diaspora-made and exile-made films with their films by and about immigrants and other traditionally disenfranchised populations, such as ethnic minorities, women, and gays and lesbians’ (44). Hence, the similitude between ‘accented films’ and other independent film movements explains our difficulty, as scholars and spectators, in making sense of this profusion of labels.

Communities of independent filmmakers have responded to this blurring of definitions with local adjustments and terminologies more appropriate to their situations. After a decade of ‘independent’ (duli) or ‘underground’ (dixia) works or film-related events, Chinese independents turned to the notion of minjian in the early 2000s. This multifaceted term literally means ‘among the people’ – ‘people’ here being understood in its folk, rather than Marxist, connotation. Escaping other politically loaded terms such as ‘independent’, the films or events created under the minjian rubric pertain to a realm apart from state institutions, and their activities are carried into the ‘space of the people’ – a space that is not under direct state supervision, like small private businesses since the opening up of the Chinese economy. This is how such films have come to be known as minjian films, and since the term clearly indicates autonomy from the state, it has often been translated as ‘unofficial’ – a word that does not entirely cover the implicit meanings of the Chinese one. As this lengthy explanation shows, local economic, political and cultural specificities, combined with translation difficulties, tend to increase the possibility of misunderstanding local film movements on the international film circuit. In the Chinese case, strategies to help independent cinema break free from
state intervention and control did not end with the creation of an alternative, local label for ‘independent’, but went so far as to disguise independent ‘film festivals’ as ‘image exhibitions’. Unlike their official counterparts, such as the Shanghai International Film Festival (Shanghai guoji dianying jie), most of the events emerging in the People’s Republic of China in the 2000s showcasing independent works have not operated under the label of ‘film festival’ (dianying jie), but rather as ‘image’ or ‘video exhibition’ (yingzhan). By creating such labels, Chinese independents operate de facto under slightly modified terms and can thereby escape the supervision of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). In this case, more than reflecting an identity quest, the terminological richness sustained by debates over independence echoes a more important and concrete survival problem for people who, for one reason or another, choose not to follow commercial and official filmmaking guidelines.

In other contexts, where state authority has not played such an overwhelming role in shaping independent status, the worldwide transformation of film and video production systems has also led scholars to further examine the notion of ‘independence’ from the 1980s onwards. As the most prominent example of independent cinema, the US model has been one of the first to undergo such in-depth questioning and demonstrates that our understanding of the manifold notions of ‘independence’ is germane to historical contexts (Biskind 2005; Hillier 2008; Holm 2007; Newman 2011; Pribram 2002). Michael Newman, for instance, more specifically focuses on the US context over the period 1989 to 2010, which opens with the launch of Sundance – the now iconic independent American film festival – and terminates with Disney’s shuttering of its distribution company Miramax – both considered decisive in ‘branding’ independent American cinema as a national alternative to mainstream film culture. Preferring the notion of ‘indie’ cinema, which includes textual features, specialised institutions and the audience’s shared knowledge and expectations, the author shows it occupying a negotiating terrain, partly outside (a kind of ‘niche media’ reacting ‘against conglomerate gigantism’) and partly inside the system (its mini-major producers and distributors, such as Miramax, can be considered a ‘symptom of this system’) (10). He also reminds us that indie cinema constitutes a form of high culture that reproduces existing social class stratifications, as a result of which its ‘alternative’ status remains questionable. Beyond the US context, Iordanova et al., in their book on Cinema at the Periphery (2010), explore the multi-layered concept of ‘peripheral’ cinema (in terms of location, practice, subject matter and narrative strategy). This collective publication contributes to a blurring of the conventional binary opposition between a cinema of the ‘periphery’ and that of the ‘centre’ and instead uncovers their multiple interactions. Others have applied the general issue of ‘independence’ to specific national contexts, in order to
investigate the diversity of practices and forms it often entails (Barlet 2010; Baumgärtel 2012; Ingawanji and McKay 2011; Pickowicz and Zhang 2006 and others). In his edited volume on film independence in the French context, Laurent Creton notes that complete independence is hardly attainable and remains at most partially fulfilled. The issue therefore consists of identifying possible dependences before ‘selecting, conciliating and dealing with them’ (Creton 1998: 11).

In fact, as suggested above, over the past twenty years, this significant number of academic studies has addressed the definition of non-mainstream films, each author suggesting either a new definition of an old term or a new term inclusive of an older definition. While these efforts all contribute to more refined concepts and increasingly accurate descriptions of various realities, this substantial array of terminologies – ‘independent’, ‘indie’, ‘underground’, ‘alternative’, ‘accented’, ‘marginal’, ‘peripheral’ – masks important similarities, while calling into question the validity of them all. In this regard, the term ‘creative documentary’ is a relatively new addition to this lexical domain, and was primarily developed to promote strong authorial endeavours and differentiate such works from mere journalistic reportage. So far, this term has proven especially relevant for the industry and practitioners. In the Netherlands, the leading International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) – active since 1988 – presents itself as ‘dedicated to the exhibition and promotion of ground-breaking creative documentaries’.5 In their online mission statement, the organisers further define this notion:

The creative documentary is an art form. The documentary-maker is therefore an artist – not a journalist . . . Like reportage, documentaries provide insights into the world around us; but they are also characterised primarily by artistic qualities: innovation, originality, professional skill, expressiveness and cultural/historical value.6

Similarly, in France, the notion became formally employed in 1987 by the state film regulating body (Centre National de la Cinématographie [CNC]) to define films

referring to the real, transforming it through the original gaze of the author, and testifying to his spirit of innovation in the conception, realisation and writing. It is distinguished from reportage by the maturity of the approach and reflection on topic, the strong imprint of the personality of a filmmaker and/or an author. (Schmitt 2002: 208)

In the French context, this institutional definition was explicitly designed for a category of films and TV programmes that could receive specific state funding
and broadcasting support. At the institutional level, the category did not last and was revoked in 1996, because it was too narrowly defined and thus too few documentary works could benefit from it. But it was resurrected in 2012 to avoid the misuse of subventions, as many commercial reality TV programmes – arguing their documentary nature – were receiving support through the relevant CNC commission (Barreau-Brouste 2013). Since then, the term has enjoyed wide support among film and TV professionals, who tend to prefer it over other alternatives. Thus, the durability of these terminologies greatly depends on the context, but when a term falls into disgrace in one sector, such as academia or the film and TV industry, it can still survive in another, such as state institutions. Meanwhile, other terms are being forged or redefined to serve various purposes (legal, economic, literary and so forth). This constant inventiveness results from a certain unease with all these words, and more specifically with the term ‘independent’, which is perhaps the most widely used and supposedly the most ill-defined.

**INTRODUCING A NEW APPROACH TO THE DOCUMENTARY**

Instead of working on a definition that would comply with each different production, distribution, exhibition and formal context, this book aims at examining recent cases where independence is at stake, either in the discourse developed by documentary practitioners themselves or in the supposed systems within which documentary images are produced. Hence, the purpose of this collective volume is to adjust an ever-changing term to the concrete modifications of documentary film practices, as well as to the new constraints and opportunities that have appeared in this field over the past twenty-five years. Clearly, the technological changes taking place in the 1990s and 2000s have played a significant role in reshaping documentary film practices. But the consequences of the digital revolution still need to be addressed without overestimating the impact of technology on other political, economic, social and cultural changes.

Since independence can only be defined in relation to existing institutions, concrete work methods and aesthetic frameworks, we decided to select case studies that could precisely illustrate situations where recent documentary practices help rethink the notion of independence. Open to a large array of geographical – and thus cinematic – contexts, these observations focus on the interactions between these new documentary practices and the established film and television industries, distribution and exhibition strategies, as well as the theoretical legacies of influential documentary film authors. In addition, continuities as much as changes are closely analysed in this volume, for
they reveal important characteristics in the filmmakers’ relation to their own work habits and support a refined historical periodisation, beyond the obvious breaks triggered by radical technological innovations.

Similarly, the subjective turn brought about by these self-productions and made possible by a growing accessibility of video practices to non-professionals has been regarded as a distinctive feature of amateur digital image-making. However, a closer examination of this issue shows that subjectivity and the emphasis on personal experience are not only a characteristic of modest documentary flicks circulated on the Internet, but are widely observed across the documentary field. Renowned filmmakers such as Rithy Panh, Agnès Varda, Jonas Mekas and Chris Marker, for instance, decided to address very important historical, social or aesthetic issues from a very personal angle, thus using subjectivity to make their works even more complex and engaging. We would therefore argue for a need to reassess the contribution of the personal in documentary forms, apart from simplistic observations of self-centredness in the digital era.

The rise of digital technologies has also moved documentary film reception to spaces usually devoted to art appreciation, to a media sphere developing alongside the mainstream and to the booming documentary film festival scene. Consequently, viewing modes have been adjusted to these recent transformations. The displacement of the documentary spectator also very often means his transformation into a more mobile, participative subject, engaged in the viewing process as well as in discussions – and, at times, actions – generated by the works themselves.

Drawing upon these introductory remarks, the book correspondingly looks into discourses, aesthetics, production, circulation and uses of still under-researched new documentary images, provides carefully documented case studies and critical analysis by each contributor and includes the necessary combination of empirical approaches and theoretical assessments to comprehend independent documentary works of contemporary significance. There is consequently overlap among each of the three main sections in terms of format, medium, terminal, genre, subject matter, purpose and national boundaries, as they critically engage existing concepts from the areas of film studies and cross-media studies. Far from trying to restrict the debate to limited areas, formats or authors, this collective volume intends to foster curiosity, renewed discussion and innovative research projects on the documentary.

While closely reflecting these research objectives and methodological approaches, the three main sections also take into consideration the ever-changing political, economic, social, cultural and technological context of the post-1990 era. The first section on ‘History and Spaces of Resistance’ looks into breaks and continuities between older and newer influential documentary
filmmakers and forms, and investigates how they can provide spaces of resistance outside official and mainstream discourse. It explores the theoretical and formal legacy of previous documentary movements and how recent works attempt to rethink, reuse and combine them in the post-1990 period. Here, history is understood both as film history and as general social history, which usually takes centre stage in documentaries and which independent filmmakers tend to examine outside common and official narratives. This section begins with a chapter on ‘Post-unification (East) German Documentary and the Contradictions of Identity’, in which Barton Byg presents the continuing collaboration between East and West German filmmakers before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall as an unexpected yet defining aspect of independent documentary filmmaking in Germany. Based on this initial statement and specific film case studies, Byg further analyses the ‘Eastern’, ‘European’ and ‘non-European’ elements in contemporary German documentary films, in order to unveil practices in opposition to highly organised national media institutions and contesting views of official historical representations.

The second chapter further elaborates on independent documentary as a challenge to both mainstream media organisations and official history. In ‘No Going Back: Continuity and Change in Australian Documentary’, Deane Williams and John Hughes discuss how, over the years, Australian filmmakers have responded to the public broadcaster’s control over documentary funding, forms, production and distribution patterns. They selected a group of documentary programmes dealing with asylum seekers, contrasting the 1952 state-funded documentary film *Mike and Stefani* with the 2011 public reality TV series *Go Back to Where You Came From*, to show how the official discourse on refugees has evolved and how documentary practitioners manage to maintain their creative and intellectual independence, even when collaborating with the public broadcaster.

The next chapter, ‘A Space in Between: The Legacy of the Activist Documentary Film in India’, continues the discussion by exploring the legacy of the 1970s activist documentary in contemporary India. Camille Deprez mainly argues that behind claims of ‘independence’, Indian activist documentarists have never completely operated outside of official and commercial domains, but have progressively developed a space of resistance in between these two prevailing spheres of influence, based upon complex collaboration procedures, in order to transform these official and commercial discourses, practices and styles from within the system.

Eric Galmard suggests another approach to the notion of legacy. In his exploration of Joris Lachaise’s 2011 documentary *Convention: Black Wall / White Holes*, he analyses how the French filmmaker critically positions himself against the French colonial past of Africa, and also how he inherited and marked his differences from two leading filmmakers, Jean Rouch and
Pier Paolo Pasolini, who filmed Africa in the early years of decolonisation. By focusing his study on the functions of speech, language and voice, Galmard demonstrates that introspective, reflexive and deconstructed forms constitute key features of independent documentary filmmaking today, while suggesting that despite obvious efforts, the position of European filmmakers towards the former colonies remains largely problematic.

Finally, in ‘Chris Marker: Interactive Screen and Memory’, Kristian Feigelson explains how this influential figure’s ceaseless experimentation with new technology has contributed to interrogating the boundaries of documentary cinema. He argues that video and digital technical advancements have allowed Marker to further develop his inquiry into image objectivity, and to keep looking back on the history and memory of the twentieth century in a non-linear, reflexive and interactive manner. Hence, his oeuvre should be understood as a unique space of resistance, made of breaks and continuities against a one-sided, fixed, linear and causal recollection of the historical past.

The second section, ‘The Personal Experience’, aims at presenting the growing interconnection between the individual and the collective as a major characteristic of independent documentary practices today, by stressing how subjectivity and personal experiences address wider, common sociopolitical issues. In this light, Raya Morag analyses Rithy Panh’s documentaries, in order to demonstrate how the filmmaker – the only survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime and genocide in his family – undermines the perpetrator’s extermination to reconstruct Cambodia’s collective post-traumatic memory and honour the human condition. Morag argues that by personally confronting this harrowing past and the people responsible for it, Panh has turned the documentary film into an efficient and innovative instrument of truth-seeking and reconciliation.

Reconciliation is also at the heart of Juliette Goursat’s examination of four Chilean autobiographical documentaries that break away from the consensual representation of Pinochet’s dictatorship delivered by the existing regime. In her chapter on ‘Contesting Consensual Memory: The Work of Remembering in Chilean Autobiographical Documentaries’, Goursat suggests that filmmakers investigating their own personal family history can thereby delve into a prohibited past and critically question individual and collective memory. In doing so, they maintain their independence from the propagandist views of the pro- and anti-Pinochet factions, as well as from the current government of transition.

Sheila Petty approaches the issue of personal memory from a different angle. In ““We All Invented Our Own Algeria”: Habiba Djahnine’s Letter to My Sister as Memory-Narrative’, she analyses how the filmmaker re-investigates the assassination of her activist sister by Islamic extremists, ten
years after the event. Using the epistolary mode, Djahnine delivers a personal and autobiographical interpretation of the Black Decade of the 1990s. The cinematic reminiscence of her deceased sibling, Petty argues, turns this intimate and silenced memory into visible images and audible sounds, while re-emphasising the contested role of women as active political, social and cultural agents of Algerian society.

The personalisation of independent documentary cinema often relies on the one-person filmmaking mode, as Liani Maasdorp describes in the case of South Africa. She explains that in the post-1990 context, South Africa’s political shift and, more importantly, the shortage of public broadcasting funding have generated individual and thus more personal documentary practices. Consequently, working alone and focusing on personal stories has led to a new level of critical commentary about the apartheid regime and the post-apartheid national identity.

Mike Ingham completes this section with an exploration of Anson Mak’s essayistic documentaries and her personal vision of the Hong Kong cityscape. While claiming that her radical and critical ethnographic film practice reinvents the meaning of the film essay, Ingham also closely looks at how the filmmaker articulates her independent political views and aesthetics around her own and others’ personal experiences of Hong Kong.

The third and final section, ‘Displacement, Participation and Spectatorship’, focuses on the development of new documentary forms and viewing sites resulting from the digital revolution and the reorganisation of the documentary industry over the past two decades. It opens with Aida Vallejo’s chapter on ‘Documentary Filmmakers in the Circuit: A Festival Career from Czech Dream to Czech Peace’. There, she considers the recent development of film festivals, some of which are entirely dedicated to the documentary, as a key agent in the definition, funding, distribution and exhibition of independent works. Based on an ethnographic case study, the chapter looks at how two young Czech documentary filmmakers learn to navigate the international festival circuit and develop different kinds of dependencies to ensure global circulation of their productions. She reveals that mastering complex networks of collaboration between filmmakers, festival programmers and industry professionals can not only ensure or threaten the successful performance of documentaries in the festival circuit, but also temper their independent status by bringing other labels – such as the creative documentary – to the fore.

Other chapters in this section examine the importance of participation and interactivity in the definition of independent documentaries in the contemporary context. ‘Experiments with Documentary in the Gallery: Material Traces of Lebanon’ draws upon the recent interest that art spaces have expressed for the documentary form. Tess Takahashi first asserts that
‘speculative’ forms of documentary art – which she defines as playful, experimental and unbridled – accentuate the uncertain boundary between fiction and fact, but also between evidence and affect. With this in mind, she proposes a detailed study of the work of artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, who use the speculative documentary form to examine the legacy of the Lebanese Civil Wars through its material traces. This case study shows that by confronting spectators to cinematic loops and material traces of the Lebanese Civil Wars in gallery installations, their documentary works formally and intellectually challenge their understanding of public and private memory, under which material and affective traces of these traumatic events continue to circulate today.

Elaborating further on the notion of documentary interactivity, Hilary Chung and Bernadette Luciano explore the issues of autonomous navigation, multiplicity and self-reflexive aesthetics in Sergio Basso’s documentary film Giallo a Milano and the associated web documentary Made in Chinatown, in order to understand the new modes of audience engagement provided by this combination of formats. They, more precisely, suggest that embracing the web documentary format triggers the immediate reaction of viewers to sociopolitical issues and creates a new kind of activist reflection, at once discontinuous, fragmentary and thus open to debate.

In a different vein, Mick Broderick and Robert Jacobs also look into new forms of audience participation, while analysing documentary responses to the earthquake, tsunami and reactor meltdowns that took place in Fukushima on 3 March 2011. ‘Fukushima and the Shifting Conventions of Documentary: From Broadcast to Social Media Netizenship’ demonstrates that Japanese netizens and social media platforms gather grassroots dissenting voices that challenge the hegemonic narratives delivered by the government and the mainstream media. Stressing the role of digital documentary practices in bringing information to the common people, this text emphasises the importance of independent initiatives in balancing discourses in the public sphere.

Online documentary practices are also at the heart of the book’s last chapter, in which Judith Pernin puts in perspective the uses generated by the independent Chinese documentary movement from the dawn of Internet film forums in the mid-1990s to the microblogs in the late 2000s. Two decades of online practices in this small film milieu reflect the evolution of both web-based platforms and Chinese independent documentary filmmakers. Using detailed examples, she indicates that their unofficial cinephilia, emerging from piracy practices, quickly moved towards exchanges reflecting the filmmakers’ concerns for recognition of their works and, beyond that, for the sensitive sociopolitical issues dealt with in their films. The popular practice of online document sharing completes and extends their film practices and creates a wider network ranging from film enthusiasts to activists.
NOTES

1. Interestingly, if these topics did not take centre stage after the national election of the Congress Party in 2004, problems persisted on the ground and the Congress administration remained nervous whenever communalism and the tense relationship with Pakistan caught the interest of documentary filmmakers. So, contrary to pro-Congress observers, official censorship quietly continued, despite the change of power over the decade from 2004 to 2014. The recent rise of a new anti-corruption party, the Aam Admi Party (the Common Man Party), and the national re-election of the BJP, the Hindu nationalist party, in May 2014 may prompt new positions on this sensitive issue.


3. In the introduction, Dabashi recalls the situation of Elia Suleiman’s Divine Intervention rejection from the 2002 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as a case in point.

4. Formerly known as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). A merger with the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) occurred in March 2013.

5. For information on the IDFA, see http://www.idfa.nl/industry.aspx, accessed 25 March 2014.


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