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Documenting Baggage

On November 24th, 2006, I traveled to the 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica, California, to observe and document how people were spending their time on “the busiest shopping day of the year,” the day after Thanksgiving. To narrow down the focus of my documentary, I decided to use photos of people and the bag or bags that they were carrying. The bag a person carries can lead to many assumptions about the person carrying the bag. In some cases, the owner of the bag may not be the person who carries the bag, though I believe the bags shown in *Baggage* are all carried by their new or longtime owners.

I have created a photo essay called *Baggage* with an observational approach. My photos are observational and in the spirit of observational cinema, however they are not an attempt at a deep and careful exploration of people’s lives, unlike filmmaker Robert Flaherty, a geologist and explorer whose “work was rooted in the careful exploration of other people’s lives.” (MacDougall, reader p. 249). In the first photo of *Baggage*, we see the profile of two women, perhaps mother and daughter, along with their handbags. The viewer’s eye becomes drawn to a fuzzy shirtsleeve and we see the women looking into and reaching into her handbag. The hair, clothing, handbags and blended coffee drink seen in

the photo leaves to the viewer assuming that these holiday shoppers are willing and able to spend a lot of money on non-essential goods and services.

The viewer's expectation is thrown off after the viewer sees two consecutive images of women who are enjoying a day of shopping followed by a photograph of a man dressed in black clothing and carrying a large, green, plastic bag over his shoulder. This man's bag does not have the name of a corporation embossed on across it. Because the bag is a plain green plastic and because the man is dressed in all black while carrying the bag over his shoulder, the viewer is now left to assume that the man in the photograph is not in a position to spend money on many non-essential goods and services.

Viewers of *Baggage*, including myself, may be quick to draw conclusions about the people in the photographs, but respected authors such as Stuart Hall rightly note that, "The exercise in interpretation thus calls for considerable caution, historical judgement – in essence, a politics of reading." (Hall, reader p. 129). Hall is specifically referring to the interpretation of historical photographs, however the same sort of careful scrutiny should be applied to contemporary documentation as well.

It is not uncommon for viewers to pass judgement on the subjects of documentations, but then find that their judgments were based on pre-condition stereotypes. In the film *The Gleaners and I*, it is easy to pass judgement and then have your expectation un-met. Several characters were given the opportunity to share with the audience a little glimpse of daily life as a gleaner in France.

Filmmaker Agnes Varda brings us deep into the daily life of a vegetarian gleaner who is an expert on nutrition and moonlights as a French language instructor at night.

Ethnographer David Wellman, in a Social Documentation lecture given at UCSC on November 8th, 2006, explained that social documentary is not the truth, but rather a truth. For example, most people in our society will assume that someone is homeless if they are seen walking down a street lined with expensive stores while carrying a logo-less green plastic bag over their shoulder. The documentation may be depicting a truth; the man was walking down the street while carrying said bag, however it may not be true that the man is indeed homeless. My documentary photo series called *Baggage* does not state that the man is homeless, but that is the assumption made by many viewers.

The way documentation has been narrated, edited and sequenced are important aspects of the documentation process that should be taken into consideration while evaluating how a truth is being told through documentation. In *Baggage*, I have chosen to create a juxtaposition between the people I interpret to be “shoppers” and those I assume to be “urban gleaners.” I chose this type of juxtaposition to amplify the viewer’s emotional response.

In *Observational Cinema*, Colin Young writes, “film is not objective. It may OBJECTIFY, but that is a different matter.” (Young, reader p. 733). Young is saying this in relation to the selective processes involved in a finished documentation. Young is very blunt when he notes that, “the camera tends to lie

but the audience tends to believe.” (ibid). I agree, the audience does tend to believe, however I also feel that the audience is becoming more critical of documentation while at the same time, documentations are playing a larger role in our lives.

Editing in documentation can mean cropping a photo and adjusting the color balance, but editing is also the process of deciding when to take a photo and from what angle the photo is composed. Is there is a practical difference between cropping a photo using a computer program and deciding to zoom in on someone’s face while taking a photo? Either way, editing decisions are being made throughout the documentation process.

Pedro Meyer really drives these points home in his online essay called “*If you liked documentary work, you are going to love digital images*” which is enhanced through photographic examples of manipulation through editing. While demonstrating the relative ease at which images can be manipulated and re-created to enhance a story through digital editing, Meyer also lays out examples of how manipulation has also been present in documentation. Meyer can take two separate images and blend them together to create a single image telling a larger story. Whether Meyer is requesting that someone pose in front of a particular background, or if he digitally blends two separate images together, either way Meyer has altered the reality and therefore truth of a given situation.

Reflecting back on *Baggage*, I have clearly edited my photos to show people and the bags they carry. While documenting, I was not aware that my

finished product would be made up solely of images of people with bags. At the outset, my goal was to depict the disparity of wealth and poverty on the day after Thanksgiving. Therefore, I have some photographs from that day showing people who seem to be homeless or really struggling to meet basic necessities, but they do not have a bag and so I did not include those images in *Baggage*.

The acts of editing, narration and sequencing are certainly forms of manipulation, however these are practices that need to be understood and embraced, for they are necessary tools of documentation and are here to stay. In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols has written, "For the individual documentary filmmaker, though, it is precisely the opportunity to be responsible, to respond to the world through argumentative representation, that motivates and sustains a position requiring, simultaneously, engagement and distance." (Nichols, p. 195). *Baggage* is an attempt at being responsible while taking a position, one that is critiquing a culture of consumption.

I have also woven a beautiful song called Bag Lady by Erykah Badu, a socially active and progressive recording artist, into *Baggage*. By choosing to use this song, I am further guiding the audience to understand there is significant class stratification in our society and they should be more conscious about the goods and services that they choose to purchase. While arguing that people should be more conscious of their consumptive habits, I have yet to discuss why it matters.

This essay is not at all intended to serve as background material for understanding the effects of a consumption-based society. There are other essays containing that critique, but I will say that the culture of mass over-consumption that is celebrated in the United States on the day after Thanksgiving is the single most powerful driving force behind the corporate exploitation and attempted domination of all aspects of life.

It is my hope that this message will reach people, even subconsciously, through the photos and audio used in *Baggage*. In the forthcoming essay *Documentary Disciplines: An Introduction*, B. Ruby Rich writes that, “For every eager-to-please, eager-to-shock U.S. documentary celebrated in the press, however, there is a corresponding under-the-radar documentary, shot digitally, distributed through festivals or downloads, urgently delivering information that the mainstream media can no longer carry.” (Rich, p. 46). My process for delivering a message to people is the one described here by Rich, that is, through self-publishing my photographs to Indymedia.org websites and to my personal website, BradleyStuart.net.

Through an observational approach to social documentation, *Baggage* calls upon people to reconsider the bags they carry and what it means to “have too much stuff” a phrase sung by Erykah Badu in *Bag Lady*. A photo and audio montage, *Baggage* aims to evoke an emotional response in the viewer through the juxtaposition of images depicting the bags people carry on the “busiest shopping day of the year,” the day after Thanksgiving.

Works Cited

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