Can we study participatory video within film studies? A succinct approach

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Abstract

Participatory Video (PV) have been widely used by activists and filmmakers for almost thirty years. But the debate concerning its nature has not penetrated yet in academic discussions. The few theoretical works that already exist point out the role of PV as a process for capacity-building and community empowerment, but obliterate its importance as a specific form of audiovisual product. The aim of this article is therefore demonstrating, through filmic analysis of several PV developed by local organizations, that these videos produced by communities can be considered as filmic objects and conceptualized into the Film Studies field. Moreover, the article sets out to redefine Nichols participatory mode of representation to avoid the theoretical exclusion it supposes towards collectively produced videos.

Introduction

In recent years, many film producers have undertaken projects in which user-generated content, shared authorship, public commitment and collective participation constitute the pivotal elements of the production process. Some examples of these practices are the film *One Day on Earth*, a compilation motion picture shot by random citizens during the day 10/10/10; or *#18daysinEgypt*, which reports through anonymous shots the revolution at Tahrir Square in 2011. The idea behind these projects is to open up all stages of film production to the public, from pre-production to final distribution, and to involve the community in the production decisions. Participatory Video (PV) is one of these practices that have been used by practitioners and activists since the 70s that have lived a boom in the last two decades.

One of the first uses of PV was related with anthropological research, and implemented to give voice to those members of a community who lacked symbolic power: it was used to introduce Maori women into community-based agriculture management projects (Kindon, 2003), to raise awareness of Métits problems in British Columbia in Canada (Evans et al, 2009) or to mediate between marginalized Angolan communities in Lisbon (Zoettle, 2012 & 2013). Apart from anthropology, PV has been also widely used in health promotion (Chavez et al, 2004), HIV prevention and des-stigmatization (Mitchell &deLange, 2011 &2013) or pacification of conflict contexts (Baú, 2014).

Despite the fact that PV practitioners were already actively working in the 80s, the theoretical nature of PV is still diffuse and has not been deeply studied yet, specially its dimension as audiovisual product. PV was not introduced in the academic debate until the 90s, when Jackie Shaw and Clive Robertson founded Real Time, an NGO linked to the University of Reading, and published together in 1997 their essay *Participatory Video: A Practical Approach to*

Using Video Creatively in Group Development Work. Since then, only a few scholars have tried to define PV, being as it was a minor study object within the Communication for Social Change field. Among these authors, the works by Shirey White (2003) and Lunch and Lunch (2006) are considered references for the quality of their work and their studies of PV as a process for capacity-building and community empowerment. Shirley White's view supports that as a process PV "is a tool for individual, group, and community development. It can serve as a powerful force for people to see themselves in relation to the community and become conscientized about personal and community needs. It brings about a critical awareness that forms the foundation for creativity and communication. Thus, it has the potential to bring about personal, social, political and cultural change" (White, 2003: 64).

In accordance to her view, Lunch and Lunch affirm that PV is " a set of techniques to involve a group or community in shaping and creating their own film. The idea behind this is that making a video is easy and accessible, and is a great way of bringing people together to explore issues, voice concerns or simply to be creative and tell stories. This process can be very empowering, enabling a group or community to take action to solve their own problems and also to communicate their needs and ideas to decision-makers and/or other groups and communities. As such, PV can be a highly effective tool to engage and mobilise marginalised people and to help them implement their own forms of sustainable development based on local needs" (Lunch & Lunch, 2006: 10)

We should congratulate ourselves for the slow but firm growth of academic discussion around PV's nature. Nevertheless, in most cases this debate focuses on PV as a process and neglects its dimension as an audiovisual product. In this study I explore succinctly the cinematic dimension of PV and determine whether, as filmic objects, they can be conceptualized and characterized within contemporary documentary theory. For doing so, I take into account that the conceptualization of participative audiovisual products as filmic objects and its consequent theorizing within the Film Studies field is scarcely developed. To achieve this, I will analyse a sample of participatory videos in order to detect, firstly, their cinematic formalities and documentary narratives, and secondly, to classify them according a well-defined taxonomy of documentaries proposed by Bill Nichols (1991, 2001).

The documentary: definition

Since the term "documentary" was coined by the leader of the British Documentary School, John Grierson, in 1926, essays on theoretical aspects of this type of film production have been few and far between (Renov, 2004). However, this situation changed drastically as from the 1990s, when a wave of new film theorists begun working almost exclusively on the documentary form. Two of the most important of these theorists have been Bill Nichols (1991, 2001) and Carl Plantinga (1997).

One of the biggest questions tackled by these and other academics studying documentaries -such as Noël Carroll (1996) or Stella Bruzzi (2001) is the definition of "documentary" itself. Due to the versatile nature of the object of study and the fact that the discipline of Documentary Theory is still relatively new, there is no unanimously accepted definition of what can be considered a documentary. This brief discussion on the definition of the term is thus needed in this study as it aims to study PV as a documentary object.

Nichols (1991: 31-54), who bases his work on contemporary film theory drawing on the Derridean revolution, defines the documentary from three perspectives. The first perspective refers to the filmmaker: a documentary is defined as a film in which the director possesses very limited control over the story; he or she can control the filming and the camera, but not the performance. The second perspective refers to the text: documentaries are audiovisual texts that depict places and people connected by a thematic and historical logic and, therefore, are structured by external textual elements. Finally, the third perspective refers to the spectator: the documentary generates the expectation that the status of the text bears a direct relationship with the real world and that, consequently, there is a congruence between the image shown and the historical fact to which it refers; thus, the documentary generates a desire for knowledge, and the spectator views it with little expectation of identifying with characters or plot twists.

On the other hand, Plantinga (1997: 83-115), who adopts a critical approach to postmodern philosophy, defines non-fiction genres on the basis of Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of projected worlds. This theory posits that humans act in the world through language, not only generating meaning, but also developing linguistic actions. Thus, words are projected together with different stances on reality. Thus, when the stance of a film is fictitious it belongs to the genres of fiction. On the other hand, when the stance is assertive (i.e. the work elucidates and questions the truth, seeks the truth and desires the truth), the final product falls into the category of non-fiction, of which the documentary is a major component.

The documentary: classification

Nichols has proposed one of the most illuminating taxonomies for classifying documentaries in the field of film theory. Based on technical and narrative criteria, he defined four categories in his taxonomy (1991: 65-106), which he subsequently expanded to six (2001: 142-212): expository, observational, interactive, reflexive, poetic and performative.

Expository documentaries follow the line of the British School initiated by John Grierson in response to a disenchantment with the light entertainment of fiction films. In these documentaries there is an omniscient voice that guides the narration of the core argument, the visuals are used to illustrate it, non-synchronous sound predominates, and editing is used to establish and maintain rhetorical more than spatial or temporal continuity. The voice of authority in this category of documentaries is the text itself, not the voices that have been recruited to take part in it.

Observational documentaries, which emerged in reaction against the moralising quality of the expository documentary, are characterised by the absence of filmmaker intervention and, therefore, by a total surrender of control. They rely on continuity editing to give the impression of authentic temporality, there is no explicit narrator, external music soundtrack, intertitles or reconstructions. Interviews are rare, as it is a mode that is committed to the immediate, the intimate and the personal.

Interactive documentaries attempt to expose the perspective of the filmmaker. Thus, it is this type of film that most commonly includes interviews and in which the addition of the narrator's voice is not left for post-production, as the filmmaker intervenes and can be heard on the scene of the events. In contrast to the expository documentary, the voice of authority is not constructed by the text but by the social actors, whose comments shape the logic of the argument.

Reflexive documentaries are the product of a desire to make the conventions of representation more obvious and to question the impression of realism. Thus, the filmmaker speaks less of the historical world and of ethical questions and focuses instead on the device of reality representation and of documentary production itself. Professional actors are often used to represent what the documentary could have been able to communicate.

The *poetic documentary*, on the other hand, focuses more on stylistic and technical aspects than on the representation of reality itself. It thus sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and does not attempt to clarify the space and time in which the events occur. Its interest lies in the exploration of associations and patterns related to temporal rhythms and in spatial juxtapositions.

Finally, the *performative documentary* is characterised by the development of a concrete, corporeal awareness embodied in a subjectivity that is distanced from the logic of objectivity. In this way, the performative documentary actively questions the presence of an omniscient subject capable of dominating all reality and operates with the aim of conveying a subjective experience.

Nichols' definition of documentary and taxonomy have been widely critiqued. For Stella Bruzzi, one of the best known critics of Nichols' definition, his error lies in the epistemological contradiction entailed in his invocation of "the idealised notion, on the one hand, of the pure documentary in which the relationship between the image and the real is straightforward and, on the other, the very impossibility of this aspiration" (Bruzzi, 2006: 12). Bruzzi instead appropriates the concept of *performativity* used by Judith Butler for her theory of gender, to argue that documentaries cannot represent historical reality. At the end of the day, for Bruzzi a filmic device is identified as a documentary by a repetition of an unstable term with no known origin. It would therefore be necessary to define the conceptual analysis conducted in this study to take into account this new definition as well.

Participatory videos as a documentary form

The six PV analysed in this article are examples of collaborative video productions in which the figure of the director is absent and the decisions are made by all active members of the community depicted in the film. This leap away from the traditional conception of video production, however, does not entail a distancing from the codes and practices operating in the construction of documentary discourse as it has been defined above.

As I noted earlier, the aim of this article is to elucidate whether these PV adhere to the epistemological precepts necessary to be considered filmic objects within contemporary Documentary Theory. To this end, I conducted a four-steps film analysis defined by Marzal Felici and Gómez Tarín (2007: 31-56) to deconstruct six PV (see table 1) from different parts of the world for the purposes of identifying the characteristics typical of documentaries as defined by Bill Nichols (1991, 2001). The four-step film analysis is a methodology that entails the deconstruction of the films by means of three categories (contextual, textual and narrative analysis), followed by a fourth step involving the interpretation of each of these elements individually and the inference of a final classification of each film according to a previously defined taxonomy

Name	Place and year production	Brief synopsis
Burgundy Voices	Canada, 2009	This PV presents everyday life in the community of Burgundy in the Canadian city of Montreal and the struggle of its members against oblivion. Of African-American origin, the English-speaking population of this isolated neighbourhood has lived for decades with the rejection of the rest of the city, which is largely French-speaking and notably wealthier. But this isolation, far from intimidating the residents of Burgundy, has given them a strong sense of collective identity and some solid grassroots movements based on fighting for their rights as a community.
Los pasillos de la memoria	Spain, 2010	Video that explains, throughout interviews with affected people, how an association is fighting for the memory of the Francoist regime victims and against the city council of El Escorial, determined to cover with concrete a mass grave in a municipal cemetery.
Child labour in Nablus	Palestine, 2010	PV explaining the daily lives of a group of offriends of the Palestinian city of Nablus. This video shows how Palestinian children combine their studies in the madrasah and leisure in the streets with long hours of manual labor to help support the family poor economies.
Un futuro de cuidado	Spain, 2011	PV that is presented as a fake documentary that speculates how a normal day shouldbe when all women went on strike. That is, what would happen if they decided not to exercise as caregivers and ceded that role to men. This video provides a feminist vision of care and a critique of patriarchal institutions.
Para Nayita	Guatemala, 2010	This video, presented in epistolary mode, displays the nostalgia of a Guatemalan immigrant in Spain for his hometown. Through a letter written by one of her friends, the cultural and social routines of Guatemala City are shown.
Rompiendo muros	Bolivia, 2010	In the city of El Alto, a group of Aymara activists ask in the local University on the level of Aymara language to students and teachers. Interviewers discover that the Ayara language still remains an endangered language. In parallel, it is shown the struggle of the Aymara women to break the symbolic walls that separate them from men.

Table 1. PVs analysed in this study (name, place, year of production and brief synopsis).

On the narrative level, *Burgundy Voices* is characterised by the absence of explicit sub-narrators and the constant intervention of the filmmakers. The logic of the argument is articulated through multiple conversations with different characters in the community who are interviewed by other residents. The hierarchy of social actors also denotes a certain ideology: while the social workers from more well-to-do neighbourhoods of the city express understanding for the problems faced by the community, the contributions of the more charismatic residents (the musician, the priest or the school teacher) reveal how, in reality, Burgundy does not receive institutional support. This narrative logic is always subordinated to the rhetoric of the video's argument and serves as political support for the social critique made in the film.

A textual analysis of *Burgundy Voices* allows an examination of the role played by editing. The different syntactic elements are connected by following an argumentative rather than temporal logic, such that omissions and juxtapositions abound. This type of editing, which rejects the representation of temporal continuity by subordinating the narrative thread to the development of the argument, is common to most of the videos analysed here.

Los pasillos de la memoria (2010), a Spanish production, is the second of the collectively produced videos examined. With similar characteristics to *Burgundy Voices*, this film narrates, through interviews and without the intervention of the filmmakers, an association's fight to preserve the memory of victims of Franco's regime against the municipal government of Valencia's attempt to fill in a mass grave in a municipal cemetery with concrete. *Child Labour in Nablus* (2010), shot in Palestine, follows the daily lives of a group of friends in the Palestinian city of Nablus who combine their studies and leisure time with long hours of manual labour. While the absence of the filmmakers in the interviews is a constant, the use of intertitles to divide the different parts of the story constitutes a textual sign of the presence of an explicit sub-narrator. The last of the videos analysed here that uses an argumentative mode of editing is *Un futuro de cuidado* (2010), filmed in Spain. While this video reproduces the same narrative strategies as those mentioned above, its rhetorical approach moves away from the exposition of arguments to offer an apparently objective presentation of a fictitious situation through the use of professional actors.

Conversely, the participatory videos *Para Nayita* (2010), from Guatemala, and *Rompiendo muros* (2010), from Bolivia, employ continuity editing rather than an argument-based approach, avoiding temporal gaps. The first one, which uses a clear and explicit voice-over narrator who avoids interaction with the characters appearing on the screen, presents the homesickness of a Guatemalan emigrant for her hometown. The second one is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, who is thus a diegetic narrator. Avoiding the use of interviews and the direct questioning of the video's participants, *Rompiendo muros* describes everyday life in the Bolivian capital of La Paz.

Discussion and conclusions

One aim of this article is to categorise the videos analysed according to the definitions of documentary posited in the prevailing theories of the non-fiction genre. On the one hand, in correlation with the position of Plantinga (1997: 83-115), all the videos examined adopt an assertive attitude towards the world insofar as they seek to question, elucidate and reveal the truth. Even in the case of *Un futuro de cuidado,* which recounts a fictitious situation with professional actors, the diegetic concomitance, namely the fact that it parallels reality, does not stray from objective reality and the argumentative exploration ultimately seeks to present a real situation.

Moreover, all the videos analysed meet the three requirements established by Nichols (1991: 31-54) for an audiovisual text to be considered a documentary. First of all, although the production of the films is collective, the ultimate aim of the communities engaging in participatory video projects is to present the reality of their situation to the general population. In this respect, the fims meet Nichols' first criterion, regarding the role of the filmmaker. Secondly, the people and places appearing in these videos relate to each other through external textual elements; i.e., their correlation is subordinated to the logic of the argument. In this sense, all the videos analysed fulfil the textual criterion. Finally, the videos generate the expectation in the spectator that the world reflected in them corresponds to the real, historical world. As they also fulfil this last, spectator-related criterion, these videos can be included under the definition of documentary posited by Nichols.

Having confirmed that participatory videos match the established definitions and can thus be considered documentaries, the next step is to classify them according to Nichols's taxonomic

criteria (1991, 2001). In this respect, my analysis has identified two predominant categories. On one side, the documentaries *Para Nayita* and *Rompiendo muros* are categorised in the mode of observational representation, both for their use of continuity editing and the absence of interaction on the part of the filmmaker. The other four documentaries are included in the expository mode, although rhetorical components of other documentary modes can be identified in two of them. In *Burgundy Voices*, the constant interaction of the filmmakers suggests that it should be placed at the intersection between expository and interactive modes. *Un futuro de cuidado*, on the other hand, could be classified in the reflexive mode because of its use of fictional elements. However, its assertive attitude and its explicatory aim suggest that this documentary is a combination of both expository and reflexive modes of representation.

On this point it should be noted that Nichols abandoned the use of the name *interactive* (1991) in favour of *participatory* (2001) in light of the emergence of digital documentaries or "web documentaries". These films, also referred to as interactive documentaries, are characterised by "disseminated authorship and a surrender of control over the narrative discourse" (Choi, 2009), contradicted the epistemological assumptions of Nichols's theory. However, the name *participatory* poses the difficulty of first defining the concept of *participation*.

In this sense, the label *participatory* supposes a new epistemological tension toward the definition of PV as a filmic object. For Nichols, the *participatory* classification refers to the presence of the filmmaker on the screen and his or her involvement with the social actors, drawing on the definition of participant observation by Malinowski or Geertz for anthropology. However, the *participatory* epithet in PV is rooted in the participatory action research (Montero Sánchez & Moreno Domínguez, 2014) and the idea that these projects seek to open up all stages of film production to the public, from pre-production to final distribution, and to involve the community in production decisions (Shaw & Robertson, 1997: 2-23). As Nico Carpentier (2011: 68) suggests, "participation in the media deals with participation in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media organizational decision-making (structural participation)". These forms of media participation allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life, and to put into practice their right to communicate. In this sense, *participatory* acquires a political connotation that transcends the subjectivity of the filmmaker. Moreover, it is important to note that there are other forms of participation, such as "remixing", "crowdsourcing" or "crowdfunding" (RoigTelo, 2012) which, although far from the activist conception of the previous definition, should also be considered in the theoretical debate over participation in the media.

Thus, in view of the confusion provoked by the *participatory* classification, I propose here a different label to designate this mode of representation. As Nichols himself acknowledged (1991: 79), in this category of documentaries "[t]he possibilities of serving as mentor, participant, prosecutor or provocateur in relation to the social actors recruited to the film are far greater." In other words, the film's director has the power to question and even compel the participants in the film to provide explanations for an event related to the development of the argument. I have proposed elsewhere *interpellant* as a more suitable descriptor for the category in question as it avoids the semantic incompatibilities arising from both *interactive* and *participatory* (Villanueva Baselga, 2015). The third category of classification in Bill Nichols's taxonomy would thus, according to this proposal, be designated the "interpellant documentary".

In line with my approach to *participation*, Jenny Weight (2012: 3-4) defines three different types depending on the positioning of community filmmakers in the final film product.

Indigo-participatory documentaries are those entirely produced by a community without the need of a professional filmmaker. On the other extreme, *externo-participatory documentaries* are those for which a professional filmmaker facilitates production and intervenes in decision making. Finally, somewhere between these two modes, we find *reflex-participatory documentaries*, in which a professional filmmaker belongs to the community and participates as a community member who may or may not contribute with his or her own ideas. Weight's considerations would benefit greatly from research into the participation moderation methods used by filmmakers to manage the debates that arise in the production of these types of videos.

This study seeks to be a modest point of departure for a refinement of the theorization of the participatory documentary that would incorporate collectively produced videos into the theoretical tradition of film studies. Such an ambitious task requires a much larger and better-defined empirical corpus. Moreover, the analytical strategy used here needs further systematisation, including control groups with documentaries that are emblematic of each of the modes of representation proposed, and expanding the sample of participatory videos analysed. Overcoming these limitations in future research will consolidate the conclusions drawn and expand the theoretical field of Film Studies outlined in this study.

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