CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Documentary Across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics, by Patricia R. Zimmerman
Authors	Waldron, Dara
Publication date	2021-11-01
Original Citation	Waldron, D. (2022) 'Documentary Across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics, by Patricia R. Zimmerman', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 22, pp. 82-85. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.22.06
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.22.06
Rights	© 2022, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-14 14:54:52
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12638



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 22, 2021, pp. 82–85
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.22.06

Documentary Across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics, by Patricia R. Zimmerman. Indiana University Press, 2019, 288 pp.

Dara Waldron

Patricia R. Zimmerman's *Documentary Across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics* is a rich and diverse compendium of texts spanning decades and covering a myriad of topics related to the expanded nature of documentary platforms. Zimmerman, best known for her pioneering scholarship in the area of home movies (considered as a subset of the documentary film), demonstrates a real intellectual zest when moving across the terrain of documentary film practices and their extension into certain areas of contemporary art. She therefore helps to materialise—in the process of this movement—a growing area of film scholarship. Many of the texts in the collection have already appeared in film and media journals and edited volumes, and many began life with an encounter of sorts. Zimmerman guides us through the journey of each text's birth, whether it involves meeting with a media arts collective at an academic conference, or being asked to contribute to a live event at Ithaca College, or even—in a text that I specifically admired about the Ukraine—travelling in a quasi-administrative role as an emissary for the US authorities. What comes across in the collection, and perhaps what is most endearing in reading it, is an energy and generosity to go beyond the confines of the campus to explore the media ecology of our times. In other words, Zimmerman demonstrates a striking ability to stay abreast of the many changes to media platforms that have impacted on the study of documentary film in recent years.

The book begins with an explanation of "reverse engineering", a term given to the critical methodology developed by Zimmerman as a theorist. Described as breaking "codes" and inventing "new forms, always building something better" (15), the concept seems vague and difficult to grasp at first; I was unsure as to what differentiated it from other critical methods of note. However, Zimmerman returns to the concept when signing off on the text, pointing out that "reverse engineering" is not designed to become a catch-all methodology that will transform our understanding of new media platforms per se, but a starting point that will help to move beyond the discipline focused nature of contemporary approaches. How, for example, can multi-media archival-based projects—such as those discussed by Zimmerman—be theorised accurately, when they involve newly established assemblages that constitute a remediation of singular objects? Zimmerman approaches these "assemblages" of objects with curiosity, not frightened by the more recent extension of remix culture into the haughty and traditional domains of high culture, and she should be commended for this. There is an authenticity to these writings that shines through. It is interesting, therefore, to reflect on the older essays from the viewpoint of the present; especially as many began as reflections on art projects of Zimmerman outside her academic research.

© Dara Waldron
This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited

Documentary Across Platforms has merit for these obvious reasons. The text's subtitle, focusing on ecology, place and politics, seems meaty at the outset, especially as the title also includes the equally substantial conceptual ferments of "documentary" and "platform". The theme based editorial decisions, however, bring the specific areas of interest together in a seamless fashion, so that a range of topics including war, conflict, the Anthropocene, silent film, home movies, remediation and globalisation are engaged with throughout. The book, nonetheless, begins with something of an assault of theoretical concepts that, once survived, slows into a benign and often personal pace. Two chapters illustrate the shift into a more personal, reflective register, with insight into Zimmerman's travels as an academic, and her curiosity as a scholar. The first is Chapter Six, "Black Soil: Chernozen and Tusit in Ukraine", charting a journey to the Ukraine working as an envoy for the American Film Showcase, a diplomacy program headed up by the US State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. Part travelogue, part reflection, part literary essay, it presents a fascinating picture of a country trying to put its head above water after the fall of the Eastern Bloc. "Growing up an Irish Catholic in Chicago", Zimmerman notes (a moment in the text that caught the attention of this lapsed Irish Catholic) "I would often hear about Ukrainians […] they were 'DPs' (displaced people), shadowy people fleeing something big and political never discussed openly" (73). Given the recent uprising in the Ukraine, the text is an insight into the history and culture of the country. It takes the form of a personal journey into a country and film culture that Zimmerman explores with gusto. The text demonstrates a concern underpinning much of the writing in the book: openness and curiosity about media ecology across the world; not confined to the Anglophone sphere alone.

The second chapter of note is Chapter Eleven, "Cambodian Digital Imaginary Archive: Genocide, Lara Croft, and Crafts", which, by charting Zimmerman's travels across Cambodia, intersperses her reflections on a friend's adopted Cambodian child and the small wooden Buddha she has promised to return to her, with theoretical reflections on the country's representation on film as a site of conflict. As in the Ukrainian chapter, we are again able to confront a "place" known mainly through its media representation; a kind of beard that hides the real Cambodia from us. Zimmerman writes of the place with intimacy and poignancy, offering a narrative backdrop to a scholarly exercise that has the pull of a literary travel essay. These chapters echo the great Susan Sontag's reflections on travelling to Hanoi and Sarajevo, trips she undertook and then wrote about during the height of the conflicts there. Unsurprisingly, in this regard, conflict and war are central to the collected texts in *Documentary Across Platforms.* A number of chapters concern the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq War, drawing attention back to a time when the Internet was only beginning to work its ways into all corners of our lives. It is during this time, as Zimmerman suggests, major changes in documentary scholarship took root. Once the preserve of a particular branch of analogue film and TV production, documentary began to infiltrate all areas of the digital landscape, furnishing a new media ecology that the book as whole reveals as a uniquely twenty-first century phenomenon. In this regard, Zimmerman emerges as a scholar of documentary, a term that has been mistreated in recent years, and a scholar of media arts set out as a shared space of intersection; a theorist of collaborative media art expression that involves the use of objects traditionally defined as documents. *Documentary Across Platform*s is, in this regard, a good companion to Balsom and Peleg's *Documentary Across Disciplines*. Zimmerman's focus is, however, on the navigation of media into new platforms opposed to the latter's treatment of the document around specific disciplinary frameworks (including a reflection on the poetic by the poet Ben Lerner).

The relationship between these collections is interesting also when considering the recent documentary turn in contemporary art (driven by certain Biennales) has brought about invigorating—and sometimes not so invigorating—discussions across disciplines. There is a genuine need to tease out the common spaces of practice and indeed language that has increasingly converged upon the conceptual framework of "documentary"; so as to enable practitioners and scholars alike to speak to each other in a shared discourse. In 2011 I helped "curate" (a word that was bestowed upon my contribution after the performed live event) a live performance event for the Cork Film Festival in Ireland. In collaboration with socially engaged art practice Softday (a sound art performance group consisting of the duo of Séan Taylor and Mikael Fernstrom) and award-winning Foley artist Caoimhe Doyle, my role was to choose silent films to be enhanced by a live remix performance by the ensemble; consisting of a Foley performance in sync with an improvised, live soundtrack by Softday. After much deliberation, I decided to screen two definitive poetic documentaries from the silent era: Joris Ivens's *Rain* (*Regen*, 1929) and *The Bridge* (*De brug*, 1928). When the parties reached an agreement to work with these films, I set about the unforeseen and lengthy process of sourcing rights to screen the films together. Little did I know my summer would be spent corresponding—via emails that had to be translated into French by my wife—with the legendary filmmaker and activist Marceline Loridan-Ivens (Holocaust survivor and wife of Joris Ivens). Loridan-Ivens was heir to Ivens's catalogue and set the conditions for screenings. She decided the event could go ahead on condition the films were screened first in silence. In other words, we had to remain true to Ivens's original vision for his films, before we could remediate the films for the second screening. As we were skeptical whether a film festival audience would be prepared to sit through a film screening twice, the viability of the whole event came into question. Eventually, the terms as set out were agreed to and the event, performed in Cork Opera House, went ahead to much acclaim. It was, by all measures, a success.

I thought back to this performance—an event which always seemed difficult to classify—when reading Zimmerman's insightful reflections on similar events she helped curate from the perspective of living documents. Zimmerman reflects on the changes to exhibition and performance as a result of a new digital ecology, when place takes on new meaning as a result of the one-off nature of the screening-exhibition-performance that constitutes the new media landscape. Her intervention serves as a way of theoretically thinking about the "event" in a new way, in addition to thinking about the scholar *as* practitioner *as* artist *as* curator bringing knowledge to bear in the field of cultural production. Looking back on my correspondence with Loridan-Ivens, I thought of the process of reverse engineering formulated by Zimmerman in the conclusion to her collection. It was only by dismantling the Ivens event into its many distinct parts that I was able to position the components that constitute the assemblage in question. And it was perhaps important a one-off performance can work against contrastingly inauthentic media specific to no place. The performance in Cork took place only in Cork; it was unique to *that* place. As Zimmerman says of such live events "it is necessary to ignite and mobilise the digital archive and documentary towards collective public memory through creating networked models of hybrid and multiple temporalities" (250). It is precisely the collective memory of the Cork event that lives on today, mobilising networked models of place across time.

Zimmerman explores in depth the cross-disciplinary platforms involved in these remediation projects, and fleshes out the affinity these live projects have with the live exhibitionary status of early cinema, when the projectionist and director were part of a spectrum of collaboration running through the community at large; of which the scholar is

another cog in the wheel. In "The Home Movie Archive Live", she takes a deep dive into the theoretical underpinnings of such documentary-based machinations, when documentary objects are remediated in the process of cross-disciplinary collaboration. "The home movie archive live" Zimmerman notes—in what amounts to a theoretical investigation of the kind of live event I curated—"operates on a vector of generative fluidity: open and recombinant, active rather than static, evolving instead of fixed, opening to new tactics where it can be energized and mobilized. As a result, the home movie archive needs to be conceptualized as a process rather than a collection of artifacts" (170). The relational and conversational is part of a process, aligning documentary forms with innovations across the arts in non-object specific artistic processes. *Documentary Across Platforms*, in this regard, is a text that traverses process-based art projects that have become such de facto homes for many documentary artifacts today. This collection of essays, by helping to extend the discourse around documentary platforms into new scholarly areas, is a vital contribution to socially engaged and dialogic art discourses. In this regard and as a final note, *Documentary Across Platforms*: *Reverse Engineering, Media, Place and Politics* is a vital textual resource for confronting the many changes that have taken place in writing about documentary and practicing documentary that has evolved into such new areas of scholarship in recent years. To remain abreast of these advances is important. It means keeping in touch with an ever-evolving world, something that Zimmerman is well able to do. Here's hoping she can keep doing it well into the future.

References

Balsom, Erika, and Hila Peleg, editors. *Documentary Across Disciplines*. MIT Publishing, 2016.

The Bridge [*De brug*]. Directed by Joris Ivens, Capi-Holland. 1928.

Rain [*Regen*]. Directed by Joris Ivens, Capi-Holland. 1929.

Suggested Citation

Waldron, Dara. "*Documentary Across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics*, by Patricia R. Zimmerman." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 22, 2021, pp. 82–85. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.22.06.

Dara Waldron is a writer and researcher based in the Midwest of Ireland. His academic work focuses on the relationship between fiction and nonfiction across documentary platforms. He is the author of *New Nonfiction Film: Art, Poetics and Documentary Theory* (2018) and has published in many international journals and magazines, including *Studies in Documentary Film* and *Millennium Film Journal*. He teaches on the Critical and Contextual Studies program at the Technological University of the Shannon (Midlands/Midwest).