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Authors	Iordanova, Dina
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The Intellect Handbook of Documentary, edited by Kate Nash and Deane Williams. Intellect, 2025, 518 pp.

Dina Iordanova

This is not an easy book to review, mainly due to its size. Containing almost thirty chapters by international scholars, it is multifaceted and complex. It is among the most comprehensive and up-to-date volumes on documentary, especially in the post-COVID-19 space, representing a microcosm of a burgeoning field: the contemporary study of documentary film form. Initiated and put together by colleagues with strong Australian ties—Deane Williams has been at Monash University for many years; Kate Nash, based at Newcastle in the UK now, also hails from Australia—gives the volume an original vantage point, which permits solid observations of the field's global dynamics. All I can do is try to give an account on the contents.

The editors are conscious that theirs is a massive anthology on changing documentary in a changing world. They postulate a set of new research questions and promise to widen the geographical scope and include new areas for research. The opening chapters are assigned to luminaries: John Corner gives an overview of the early developments in the discipline, related to audiences and various pioneering groups and scholars, some from Europe but mainly from the US. Michael Renov outlines what he has termed the "epistemic crisis of the documentary discourse" (55), bringing the discussion closer to present-day. Alexandra Juhasz explores various "posts." Most important among those is the "post-truth" turn. All three chapters reference a range of US documentaries and the work of (mainly) American scholars. As I am based in Europe and Asia, for me this America-centrism felt somewhat like a blast from the past—I feel we are well-into the "post-American" world by now. Luckily, other parts in the volume compensated, and the book turns out to be diverse and multi-cultural.

Let me highlight some of the contributions that change the perspective. Part Two, for example, entitled "In the Anthropocene", focuses on documentary work concerned with climate change discourses and imagining a world with no humans in it. Alisa Lebow has written on apocalyptic documentaries about man-made natural disasters (e.g. Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness*). Mandy Rose explores the VR documentary focusing on matters of climate emergency and animal rights. Kiki Tianqi Yu discusses filmmaking for a sustainable future and the relationship with nature found in Asian documentaries. Selmin Kara writes on Canadian and then global material, tackling matters of realism as they manifest in documentary practices and immersive experiences from around the world, from ethnology to nuclear disasters. There are references to the work of Jihoon Kim and Laura Marks, scholars who mainly work on material from East Asia and the Middle East. Here, diversity is retained.

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Part Three deals with the complexity of audio-visual polyphony as it plays out in documentary representation. Brazilian Fernão Pessoa Ramos discusses the sensory documentary and matters of mise en scène, from Flaherty to Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Simona Schneider's discussion of "Lyrical Polyphony as Practice" explores multi-vocal films through focusing on the sisterhood documentary, from support groups for breast cancer or abuse victims through to simple enjoyable togetherness. In this part, I particularly liked Annabelle Honess Roe's case study of approaches to film as scaffolding for imagination and empathy (e.g. the juxtaposition of POV and facial expression; combination of documentary footage and animation) and the difficulties in elucidating/extracting compassion, as seen in the Danish award-winning animated refugee story *Flee* (*Flugt,* Jonas Poher Rasmussen, 2021); also the shattering *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) is discussed. This essay was elegant and short; it can be used in teaching as the films are easy to access.

Part Four, dedicated to the ethics and politics of representation, is closest to my heart. Here, the editors have secured real diversity. The part opens with Jamie Baron's succinct essay on Shirley Clark's staged drug addiction documentary *The Connection* (1961). Argentinian Mariano Mestman—in what's part of a wider research project—reports on the 1960s history of the International Association of Documentary Filmmakers and reintroduces many leftist figures some of whom have been present in scholarship (Joris Ivens, Jean Rouch) whilst others have been largely ignored (Roman Karmen). I particularly like Mestman's stress on the importance of film festivals as contact zones, an area that is still to be properly acknowledged in documentary scholarship. Catherine Russell writes about the colonial imprimatur of archival holdings and links it to appropriation by white Canadian settler artists and to the indigenous resistance as seen in NFB's 2015 project "The Souvenir". It is a good opportunity to discuss behaviours and choices that aim at decolonising the archive. Jerusalem-based Raya Morag frames Wang Bing's recent work on Chinese terror by framing it against what she terms "the paradigm of Western testimony" (213); this is another text that I would happily use in teaching. The last contribution in this part is by Deane Williams and Antonio Traverso, who focus on collaborative projects in the Global South. The three case studies of decolonising documentarians who worked transnationally (David Bradbury, Rodrigo Gonçalves and Dennis O'Rourke) make for persuasive reading.

Part Five is entitled "Documentary and Politics". It opens with Helen Hughes' case study on the Nuclear Documentary, which covers a range of titles (but not exhaustively) and tackles matters of the nuclear industry and evacuated communities overall. Starting with Vertov, Shub, and Gettino, Ryan Watson writes on radical civic media and reveals how they play out in Western Sahara, Palestine and Kashmir in present day. Producer Caty Borum's documentary for social change is yet another American-centric treatise which felt pretty much pre-Trump and lacking in anticipation in what perilous direction things may go. I found it excessively self-referential and overly engaged in namedropping. Annie Goldson's text explores the disruptive appearance of Netflix and its impact on documentary today. Written from the point of view of New Zealand—she made *Kim Dotcom* (2017)—she suggests streaming services are a natural home for documentary. As I believe Netflix is doing huge damage to documentary, I found the chapter unconvincing, with its discussions on "algorithmic logic", binging, true crime, and ""successful" titles such as *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* (Rebecca Chaiklin and Eric Goode, 2020). I also found the presence of this chapter in a section on political documentary bizarre. Had it spoken about Netflix's corporate conformity, dictated by the commercial drive to expand in international markets, it would have made more sense. Another topic, covered by Kate Nash and Craig Hight, is audience engagement with political documentary on Netflix; it takes as its case study Netflix's

ecological film *Seaspiracy* (Ali Tabrizi, 2021). This chapter was well written and read nicely, but I remain unconvinced by the choice to explore audience reactions in the absence of adequate viewer data, which a corporation like Netflix does not make transparent. Finally, Gilberto Alexandere Sobrinho deals with large scale longitudinal projects of indigenous activism. Even-handedly written and full of excellent observations, this one is perhaps my favourite piece in the volume.

Part Six considers the changing documentary industry: production, distribution and audiences. Grace Russell's lengthy treatise on how documentary can be used by other film forms delineates the discourse on the "utilitarian disposition" and outlines the differences between documentary and "useful film", an approach that detaches a body of works for separate study but that I am not yet sure has contributed anything radically new. Practitioners Inge Sørensen and Nick Higgins focus on funding for documentary "in the age of streamers". Well argued, it registers the chronic precarity related to the "no budget" documentary. However, it does not seem to make much distinction between the made for tv/streamers and the independent documentaries (e.g. those that indie creators post on YouTube). Editorial control and intervention do not seem to be addressed; no budgets are specified. So even if I find this an excellent piece because it shows deep understanding of the dissemination of documentary, it is not possible to derive much useful knowledge from it. I wish it would have revealed how variable funding models impact storytelling and how the choice of topics gets restricted in the context of diminishing diversity. Annette Hill's study, the last one in this part, compares the interactions of young people in Scandinavia with documentaries offered by the streamers and YouTube; she establishes their preference for the factuality found on YouTube, especially during COVID-19.

Opening Part Seven, on "Digital Documentary Practices", Chiara Grizzaffi looks at new compilatory forms, at the crossroads between documentaries and audiovisual essays, and discusses matters of appropriation and reuse. The chapter includes a valuable historical overview of related writing, then discusses the relational aspect of spectatorship as appropriation. This is followed by an outline of digital editing tools, and profiles of practitioners such as Kevin Lee and Catherine Grant, but also examples of cinephile collecting, database and postproduction approaches as seen in the works of Kogonada, Richard Misek, and others. The chapter introduces important new developments at the borderline of digital/analogue technologies, hybrid work and desktop documentary. A piece co-authored by Dale Hudson, Claudia Costa Pederson, and Patricia R. Zimmermann discusses the innovative conceptual thinking behind the use of augmented reality. They treat it as a location-based process which helps the fluid linking in of new technologies and enables new approaches to "place", environmentally rather than cinematically.

Brian Winston's not quite finished but fairly complete draft on new aspects of the link between documentary and social change is also included in the book, posthumously, with an introduction by Kate Nash. It discusses up-to-date developments such as head mounted devices (HMD), the "immersive" documentary and other virtual reality phenomena, but it also takes large retrospective excursions where a certain "technological jostling with the real" (428) can be observed. *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* (Edward S. Curtis, 1914), for example, is resurrected to allow for a discussion of naturalist illusion and the non-interventionist stance. Winston is sceptical of new developments and seems to suggest that all the fuss around them does not do much more than maintain an illusion. He references a "utopian filmmaker much given to the quixotic" (433), Peter Wintonick, and acknowledges a new range of possibilities afforded by digital equipment. But he also talks of Topiary Landberg's *Exit Zero: An Atlas of*

One City Block through Time (2021), a web-based interactive "field guide" of a single block in central San Francisco, where an urban audience gets entangled in a web of interconnections and dramatic transformations. He references phone-made films, from Canada to China (Zhu Rikun). A veteran of the field, this final piece by Winston shows he always stayed up to date—by talking of new YouTube and Vimeo projects that use augmentation strategies and of the shifts in settler-coloniser epistemologies and historiographies. In that, Winston's essay makes for a spectacular and convincing conclusion to a rich and versatile volume.

As already stated: due to the size of the book, my review is inevitably covering width. I hope others will engage with the views presented here in more depth. To conclude, I would like to stress that I particularly liked the fact that most chapters were of approximately the same length. Many of them pursued the transnational approach, and even if still mainly focused on the West, some new horizons were opened. I also loved the inclusion of the work of Patty Zimmermann (1955–2023) and Brian Winston (1941–2022) who recently left us. It speaks highly of the community ethics in the documentary studies field.

By way of critique, I have just a few remarks to make. It would have been good to have a filmography (but there is an index, which is great). One of the most referenced films is Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Homo Sapiens* (2016)—but this also happens to be one of the least available documentaries. As an East Europeanist, I was frustrated not to see a single reference to the work of people like Sergei Loznitsa, Marcel Łoziński, or Mila Turajlić. People such as Mark Cousins, Laura Poitras, or Kamal Aljafari don't seem to have made the cut for these authors, nor is there any attention to the exciting "small file media" project that colleagues from Vancouver and Dublin have run for nearly a decade now. Besides Mestman's contribution, documentary festivals are not on the radar—and this I consider a serious blind spot. The authors do not seem to be familiar with the work of Caroline Moine, Aida Vallejo and Ezra Winton on the history of documentary festivals. A book that talks at length of streamers and other new methods of dissemination but leaves out the thriving network of documentary (and other) festivals is incomplete. After all, it is at festivals—and not on Netflix—where documentary cinema is alive and well in all its marvellous abundance, and where it gets talked about, pitched, financed, showcased, judged, and awarded.

Lastly, at times I felt a certain dissonance. Some chapters sounded as if they were written prior to COVID-19, others were up-to-date and fully in line with the rapid changes that this global health emergency put into motion. I do not know anything of the gestation of the collection, so it is quite possible it may have been a long time in the making. Ideally, it would have been given an overhaul from today's point of view. However, I also recognise that would not have been easy. After all, any book would be out of date in the era of *Melania* (Brett Ratner, 2026) and *Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk* (Sepideh Farsi, 2025).

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Dina Iordanova is Emeritus Professor of Global Cinema at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.