

## Entanglements / Harold Sikkema / December 2015 / Liss Platt / CSMM708

I was not, in the end, strong enough to adhere to the poetic mode of documentary in any strict sense. *Entanglements* does have poetic moments, to be sure. But I found myself grasping after narrative and structure the entire way. I resisted it, especially at first, because I had in mind from the beginning that I wanted the fluidity of the materials to emerge on their own terms. I had sought to bring out the visual language intrinsic to stray plastic, rather than to project my own. But even if I failed to meet these self-imposed guidelines, at least they offered me a starting point. The result, I think, is rather ridiculous, since the weight of its autoethnographic anthropomorphizing is nearly unbearable. But it feels honest to me. Perhaps the blatant narcissism will serve as an adequate antidote to the even more blatant environmental concerns that the film is laced with. I'm grateful for the journey, and for what the plastic has seen in me and what I have been able to see in the plastic.

Let's dive into this modal mesh a little further. With regard to the poetic mode, Nichols points out that "social actors seldom take on the full blooded form of characters with psychological complexity". Indeed, one might not expect to find such complexity in mere plastic. But once I found that I saw myself (reflected in) the plastic, I wound up using the plastic as a channel to talk about my own vulnerability. This choice had the negative consequence of robbing the imagery of its raw power, and narrowing its possible meaning. While my poetic use of what Nichols would call "temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions" (Nichols 102) does persist, the overall feel is now dominated by the narrative frame. Perhaps in the future I will make a film with purely aesthetic protagonists, who inhabit the discontinuous space that Nichols describes. This would be a very different film, probably devoid of semiotic overlay, and definitely devoid of English. It would also be difficult to make, since I could never entirely divorce plastic from its material and social context.

*Entanglements* has an expository aspect, though it's employed somewhat ironically. I flip briefly into a kind of ironic expository mode with my "advertising" outburst (4:07) given as a kind of overbearing didactic caption. But the tone of my plastic "characters", though in some respects reticent, is also often a tone of confidence and authority, akin that associated with expository films.

My removal of any original sound (the entire score/narration is my own overlay) distances the viewer from the sense that she is engaged in direct observation, but to the degree that plastics can be imagined as bodies, the work does have voyeuristic quality about it. We find ourselves "in" on a kind of intimacy.

I want look now at Nichols' ethical description of documentary as a "three-fold interaction among filmmaker, subjects or social actors, and audience", because in *Entanglements*, these three are somewhat ambiguously folded together. When we bring Nichols' distinctions to bear on *Entanglements* in the question form – "Who speaks? About whom? To whom?" – the answer is a wash. The first ambiguity is with respect to the plastic shards themselves. Being non-human, it isn't clear that they in fact constitute "social actors". Nevertheless, we do hear them "speaking", as if giving individual testimony. But are they speaking for themselves? We have no direct way to verify. Each voice is heard through the same mouthpiece: that of the narrator. So on the one hand we have a multiplicity of voices: very nearly a kind of a participatory mode. We might imagine an ethnographer, collecting these viewpoints, but only via email, and creating the narration herself. This would of course present various ethical concerns. But if we are even remotely astute, we do understand that this collectivity of voices emerging from one mouth is simply the filmmaker's way to talk about himself. Since it became a kind of self-portrait, I have myself begun to read the film this way. I am both the interviewer and the

interviewee. Nevertheless, the final reading exists alongside an underlying blur of vision. If the many voices (of anthropomorphized plastics) are really the singular voice of one person's experience (the filmmaker's), we do get a clear answer – "I speak, about myself, to you" – but not without some poetic meandering along the way. The pronouns "We" and the "I" are used interchangeably.

I cannot pretend that these ambiguities (even though I have used them with a degree of intention) constitute any kind of thoroughgoing reflexivity. But I feel that at least in the making of this film, my assumptions were called into question. If the process, (and perhaps also the product) leads to a greater degree of self-awareness, then I'll be grateful.

The ecological subtext of the film adds perhaps a third way of answering Nichols' question. In this case the ecology itself constitutes a subjectivity: "I speak about her to you", while the implicit indictment of human agency in the creation of this ecological scenario reads as "I speak (accusingly) about you (and your negligence) to you face".

I want to reflect briefly on formal and open voices. I would note that in one sense the facts of the film are psychological facts, which are spoken about matter-of-factly. So, if epistemically, we assume the plastics to be "explaining some portion of the world to the viewer", (Plantinga 107) and if we consider the psychology to be such a "portion of the world", then we might imagine that the voice is formal. We might further suggest that the structured nature of the film (one interviewee at a time) is consonant with the called-for "harmony, unity and restraint" (Plantinga 107) of a formal film. If however, we consider how a formal film "answers every question ... that it has chosen to pose" (Plantinga 107) the conclusion would have to be that *Entanglements* does not participate in formality whatsoever. It is a documentary in open voice from start to end.

I don't think I would have made the same documentary without having studied Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscapes* this semester. Their partnership represents a way of working that I think tackles ecological ambiguities quite sensitively. I share, in a way, Burtynsky's dilemma, of having to turn into spectacle that which is ultimately despicable, in order to make headway. My approach has been similar to his, in that we both fixate on material image, and hide the body. Burtynsky needed Baichwal's help to reintroduce the human body. While I lack, for the moment, a comparable partner, I did have at my disposal the genre of self-portrait as a means to explore conflicted eco-identity.

With gratitude, it's been a splendid term. The exploration isn't over.

Nichols, Bill. "Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?" *Introduction to Documentary* (2001): 1-19.

Nichols, Bill. "What Types of Documentary are There?" *Introduction to Documentary* (2001): 99-138.

Plantinga, Carl. "Voice and Authority" *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction film* (2001): 101-119.