THE POLITICS OF SPACE, A SPACE FOR POLITICS:
CALIFORNIA NEWSREEL - FORTY YEARS AT THE SITE OF RECEPTION

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At the risk of appearing foolish, I want to pose three questions whose answers may appear obvious. What is a documentary space? Where is it located? And who is empowered by it. These issues have resurfaced like a repressed memory throughout Newsreel's forty-one year history. They arise from what appears to be contradiction facing any socially engaged film practice. The cinematic *disposiitif* constructs a space of reception; how then can it also be a site for social agency? Isn't radical or political spectatorship something of an oxymoron? If the cinematic image is the presence of an absence, does it not at the same time absent its viewers' present? How can such dis-placed persons effectively engage the place they are? Finally, can the documentary's political topology be reconfigured to create a space for politics? I want to explore these conundra using four examples from Newsreel's admittedly quixotic past. I apologize if I dawdle along the way, take too many side trips, only to end up hopelessly lost. Sometimes it's not the destination but the journey that matters.

1. A Brief History of Space

Any consideration of documentary space should logically begin by problematizing space itself. Here, I offer what I would facetiously call a "brief history of space," no more than a rough sketch, perhaps a caricature. For two thousand years, Western thought was dominated by spatial idealism, starting with Parmenides' spherical universe and Plato's perfect polyhedra, canonized in Euclidean geometry, rearticulated by Brunelleschi and Alberti through Renaissance perspective, then transmitted to the Enlightenment as Cartesian coordinate geometry. Newtonian classical mechanics assumed absolute or substantive space existing independently of any objects or subjects, in effect, the reification of emptiness.

As early as the 11th Century, Ibn al-Haytham proved experimentally that vision was intromissive not emissive, that is resulted from light entering the eye where it was then interpreted. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued against Newton and Leibniz that space was an a priori category of consciousness in which sense stimuli were arrayed. Hence is was subjective rather than substantive, capable of yielding only contingent truths, more or less useful hypotheses or representations of alterity, a world ready-to-hand yet nowhere.

Hegel's audacious, if unconvincing, last-ditch attempt to recuperate idealism postulated an Absolute Idea dialectically evolving or "thinking itself" as space and time, that is, as world history. Turned on its head by dialectical materialism, space became relative, historically contingent. Husserl's intentional phenomenology relegated space to a purely attributed or constituted reality. His pupil, Heidegger, essentialized this as human "being-toward-the-world," attunement or concern (*Sorge),* the throw or projection of

Dasein's ontological throwness into existence, terms which have an obvious resonance for film practice. His French follower, Derrida, disembodied space as discourse, another deceptive device of *diffèrance,* [1] which, tellingly, he also called *espacement.* Freud psychologized space as the condensation, sublimation and transference of inchoate psychic energy or libido into an image of the other. Surprisingly, current neurophysiology echoes some of these murky lucubrations, accounting for spatial awareness through a composite, cognitive process of analysis and synthesis, categorization and inference, inscribed by evolution, culture and personal experience..

This constructivist view of space gave rise to a discrete branch of mathematics, topology, qualitative as opposed to quantitative geometry. Rules for inclusion, extension, connection and transformation could generate non-Euclidean geometries, such as hyperbolic Reimann spaces, Einstein's curved, expanding space/time continuum and the ten-dimensional space of contemporary string theory.

In the visual arts, spatial relativism led ineluctably to the crisis of analytic cubism and its various sequelae; suprematism's abstract spaces, surrealism's interior or psychic spaces, abstract expressionism's rejection of space for the picture plane, and post-modernism's spatial vertigo, its giddy swoon on the edge of "alterity," the "remainder," the "abyss," the space beyond space. Finally, there is our current topological cliché, virtual space, though as we have seen, all space is, in a sense, virtual.

2. Documentary Space: A Space for Politics?

What are the implications of this fast-forward through epistemology for our initial questions about documentary topology? We can now, I think, locate documentary space not in the image or the pro-filmic, ever-illusive other, but in front of the screen, in the space of reception and the space stretching out around it. More precisely space lies quite literally "in the mind of the beholder," in the audience's subjectivity, its sense of the here and now. It follows that the documentary subject, in both senses of the word, is not the third person ethnographic subject, nor the first person reflexive, essayistic subject but the silent, silenced, interpellated second person viewing subject. Furthermore, that subject can have no present, no presence, no sense of place, until one is constructed; it exists only insofar as it has been enunciated. Thus the site of reception becomes a construction site, potentially a site for social reconstruction. When perceptions is understood as active not passive, present and presence are no longer nouns but verbs. As Gaston Bachelard observes in his seminal *The Poetics of Space,* "Valorized space is a verb and immensity, whether inside or outside, is never a place."[2]

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[1] Derrida's term *diffèrance* itself sets up a dichotomy between some ineffable referent, the pre-verbal, the apophasic, and the verbal, the discursive. It then subalterns the latter, as a deferral, postponement or avoidance of the former. The significance of Derrida's choice of *deferre (* L. to pass on) becomes evident, if we add other prefixes to *ferre* (L. to carry)., cf. *transferre* (L. to carry across, E. transfer, translate, from past participle *translatus*), *effere* (L. to carry out of, bring forth,, lift up E. elate, from past participle *elatus.*) or cognate *metapherein,* (Gr. to carry beyond., E. metaphor) This etymological de-centering shifts the meaning from deferring or postponing something, to translating it into another medium or giving birth to something new. In a *reduction ad absurdum* of Derrida's reductivism the body becomes a deferral of the universe and perception a deferral of sense data. By opposing linguistic positivism with a purely relational linguistics, he occludes the possibility of a generative linguistics, where "semantic drift" becomes semantic proliferation, the production of new meaning.

[2] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* (Beacon Press, 1966), 202

Although mind situates itself, it is itself situated in history, as Hegel recognized. Our paradigms for the present, our spatial and temporal schemata, are selected for us by regimes of knowledge, privileged discourses and hegemonic ideologies. As Derrida famously observed, the languages we speak speaks us. Therefore space, architecture, geography all enact a politics, they dispose power; they define the horizons of the possible - where we can go, what we can do; in short, they put us in our place.

The cinematic apparatus similarly appropriates and canalizes the construction of consciousness; it colonizes the present; it occupies mental space and time, in more ways than one. Metz' imaginary signifier, imaginary only because we imagine it not a signifier, sutures the viewer to its diegetic space/time, shifting presence from the viewers to the screen, leaving them spectral presences in the dark, hidden even from themselves. It is not for nothing that the frame has been called a celluloid coffin since it entombs not just a past but the present as well. Perhaps, scopophilia is closer to necrophilia than voyeurism? The most common encomia for films – absorbing, eye-grabbing, stunning, entrancing, enthralling spell-binding, attraction - are all more appropriate to a black hole than a space for social praxis.

Cinema thus usurps cognition; the shot blinkers vision; montage regiments time; and narrative marches us to its inevitable, therefore inevitably banal, conclusion. Cinema's century-long monologue, like a bar room bore, just won't let go. Its lapel-grabbing hyper-denotating shoves the viewer into a claustrophobic mental corner; while its ADT-addled cutting leaves neither time nor space for thought. Whatever happened to Bazin's long shot? In the super-saturated, assaultive media culture of late capitalism, could freedom begin with boredom?

Marx in his discussion of the commodity fetish notes that when the process of production is alienated from the producers, the products of their production come back to confront them as an other. Cinema by commandeering the production of consciousness similarly congeals vision into reification, ossifies thought into ideology and petrifies the present with the past. Is the cinematic image the modern face of Medusa? Heidegger observed that the presence of the ontic blinds *Dasein* to its own ontology.[3] This transfer of value or presence from the producer to the product results in that other, more familiar form of commodity fetishism. Commercial entertainment, addictive pre-processed junk food for consciousness, has proven to be capitalism's most seductive labor-saving device.

Social change documentary, like its purported adversary, the mainstream media, hermetically seals its viewers in an air-tight, albeit oppositional, discourse, rarely acknowledging or even recognizing its own privileging assumptions. The ideology may be different but it isn't different from ideology. The original dogma may have etiolated into insipid sentimentality, but, as Vertov quipped, realism, bourgeois or socialist, remains the opiate of the people.

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[3] Heidegger's distinction between the ontological a mode of existing and the ontic, the predicates of the verb to be seems arbitrary. A term from embryology, ontogeny, might better describe the phylogenic continuity and constructedness of consciousness. Although Heidegger inveighed against a "metaphysics of being" or ontotheology, his ontological invention, *Dasein,* could be a surreptitious attempt to rescue being from becoming, "primordial humanity" from technics..

Some experimental filmmakers working on the periphery of documentary have felt uncomfortable with the genre's retro realism. One group has embraced an austere, reflexive anti-ethnography, turning the camera on themselves and their post-modern renunciation of "cinema." Others have reacted to the so-called "crisis of representation," aggravated by the digital destabilization of the image, by inscribing the film's surface directly, a deliberately pre-industrial practice in reaction to a post-industrial, cybernetic age.[4] These alternatives only negate the status quo; they are transgressive without being transformative, as if privileging the sub-alterned term of an already bankrupt binary escaped it. Accordingly, subjectivity is valued over objectivity, the "excess" over the expressed, film's materiality over its indexicality. But the goal of dialectics is to negate the negation, not to sacrifice but to sublate, not to retreat into subjectivity or the emulsion but to reclaim space as a contested territory.

3. Expanded Cinema: Expanded for Whom?

In contrast to documentary or even experimental film, one media practice - "expanded," "immersive" or "para-cinema" - has had the explicit goal the interrogation of the cinematic *dispositif.* Its paleontology stretches back at least as far as the *trompe l'oeil* at Pompei, the *quadratura* of the Venetian Settecento and the 360 degree photographic panoramas of the 19th Century. One of the first uses of cinema to create a politicized, non-objective space (or *Pruon)* was a 1926 multi-projector installation by the Soviet constructivist, El Lissitsky in Cologne This influenced the Bauhaus designer Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's 1930 light-space modulator or *Lichtraum* (a pun on Light Room and Light Dream), a dematerialized, modernist space dubbed *Der Raum der Gegenwart* or "Room of the Present." In the '60s the American technotopian filmmaker, Stan van der Beek proposed a "social imagistics," projecting footage collected from around the world onto a videodome, while the audience, recumbent on the floor, entered into what was described as a "collective trance," a curious posture for political activism.

The New York minimalist Tony Conrad has made explicitly political claims for such a cinema of sensory excess. He argues that only by overwhelming the audience's cognitve imprinting by communicating with the autonomic nervous system can it be wrenched free from the "Empire's" Euro-heteropatriarichal clutch. Why he considers reptiles more liberated than humans remains a mystery. Conrad has admitted to trying to hypnotize his audience, a stance which seems more consistent with a demagogue than a democrat. In his canonical *The Flicker* repeated strobing, besides causing the occasional epileptic seizure, collapses the cinematic *dispositif* by battering the viewer into a spaceless and timeless eternal present. In equating epilepsy with ecstasy, Conrad betrays the recrudescent Romanticism lurking in post-modernism, seeking an impossible authenticity, by privileging alterity, the sub-alterned and the pre-conscious over the conscious.

Ubiquitous expanded cinema techniques such as digital manipulation, real-time sampling and remixing, multiple superimposition, even roving projectors may activate the video jockey but they immobilize the viewer. Similarly, image generation using aleatory, algorithmic, recursive or "natural" processes may free the text from the tyranny of the author but they frustrate spatiation thereby ejecting the viewer from history. "Immersive

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[4] Among the former, I would mention such distinguished filmmakers as Trinh Minh Ha, Leslie Thornton, Mark La Pore and Apitchatpong Weerasethekal and among the latter, Jennifer Reeves, David Gatten and Jeanne Liotta.

cinema" by drowning its audiences in sensory overload confuses chaos and indeterminacy with liberation and empowerment. To the extent that expanded cinema simply means *more* cinema, it necessarily means less space for its viewers' critical agency. It may impose new, non-objective spaces but it has not relinquished cinema's prerogative to commandeer space. Ironically, a *politically* expanded cinema might well require less cinema, at least a more self-effacing, open-ended and "sociable" cinema.[5]

One expanded cinema practice developed in London during the late '60s as a polemic against what it saw as the metaphysical obfuscations of the American avant garde as typified by Belson or Brakhage. Calling itself "structural materialist cinema," it proposed to "perform the apparatus," to deconstruct the cinematic *dispositif* by drawing attention to it. All content was evacuated from the image to foreground the mechanics of projection, the throw, the spocket holes and framelines, even the 26 frame sound/pcture offset and, of course, the projectionist himself. This seems a vulgarly materialist interpretation of the cinematic apparatus, confining space to the space of projection, suppressing its connections to the world beyond and the wider apparatus of ideological production. This may reflect the petite bourgeois, craft mentality of these recent art school graduates, a throw-back to William Morris' "guild socialism," without broader social sympathies.

4. Early Newsreel: From Screen to Street

We should not be surprised by parallels between avant garde practices and Newsreel's more pedestrian and pragmatic efforts to reconfigure the space of reception. The rationale for political film has always been to activate the space of reception, in the sense of transforming a passive, anomic audience into an active, engaged public, not the spectators of history but its protagonists. Expanded cinema and activist cinema therefore *should* share certain tropes: from text to context, from mimetic verisimilitude to performative immediacy, from diachronicity to synchronicity, from two to three dimensions, in short a convergence of diegetic space with the space of reception.

Newsreel was formed in May, 1968, during that brief confluence of the Counter-culture and New Left when space had become politicized and physical and political position were often coincident. For example, Newsreel's first film was shot inside the occupied buildings of Columbia University; the group's name signified the news from the opposite side of the police lines. At the same moment, Situationist-inspired students in Paris, were tearing up the Boul Mich, building barricades under the slogan, "beneath the paving stones, the beach." They were enacting the Lettrist Guy DeBord's call for a psycho-geography, a landscape of desire. Meanwhile, in laid -back San Francisco, happenings and be-ins "took back the streets;" across the Bay, People's Park "liberated" a vacant lot from Clark Kerr's "multiversity". Not far from Newsreel's office, Ant Farm, the design collective of "Media Burn" fame, invented the "inflatable," an ephemeral, formless architecture for rallies, rock concerts and other "gatherings of the tribe." And each weekend the San Francisco Mime Troup staged Brechtian agit-prop theatre in the city's parks.

In this heady (no pun intended) atmosphere, it was perhaps inevitable that Newsreel's first "actions," as our screenings were quaintly termed, purported to inscribe revolutionary space onto the literal facades of "bourgeois reality." Its cinevan, equipped with projector and loudspeaker, would swoop down on working class neighborhoods and

project the latest newsreels on the first available wall – until the cops showed up. I suppose such hit and run "guerilla cinema" could be seen as *rameurs avant la lettre.* The assumption seems to have been that the bemused on-lookers would be swept-up into the revolutionary struggle flickering before them, transforming an illusion of reality into reality itself. On one occasion, probably apocryphal, students at the University of Wisconsin stormed out of a screening of "Columbia Revolt" and occupied their own administration building. The idea of revolution by example has parallels with *focismo*, Che Guevara's strategy for implanting "one, two, many Viet Nams." .

Predictably, this anarchic enthusiasm was quickly chastened, denounced as "left adventurism, an infantile disorder" in Lenin's dismissive phrase. Newsreel made a 180 degree Zhdanovite volte-face. It would now "proletarianize" cinema, embedding it so deeply in the workers' movement as to be indistinguishable from it. During this *ouvrieriste* turn, film was conceived as nothing more - or less - than a tool. This was "immersive" cinema with a difference; rather than immerse the audience in cinema, cinema would be immersed, indeed, drowned in the audience. Screenings were arranged at sites of what was deemed "authentic class struggle" – unions, community groups and, curiously, universities. *Entfremdungeffects* were duly deployed; for example, interrupting films at intervals so "organic intellectuals" (this predated health food stores) could apply the film's "lessons" to the "concrete conditions." "Activation kits" or "user's manuals" provided detailed instructions for throttling the last breathe of autonomous presence from a film. One from 1982 required, by my estimate, three weeks of surveys, discussion circles, readings and direct action, to tame a single 25 minute film. This Popular Front or "right opportunist" period, in the catchy lingo of the time, had one entirely unintended consequence; Newsreel's films actually became useful; universities and to a lesser extent civic sector organizations wanted to buy them; despite its best efforts, Newsreel had stumbled onto a market and become financially sustainable.

5. Newsreel in a Post-Documentary Age

Ironically, our long, ardent courtship of the audience was finally consummated not by our own exertions but by our audience's passionate, sometimes promiscuous, embrace of web 2.0 software and the Fair Use Doctrine. Google Alerts unearthed shards of Newsreel films strewn across the web, littering Blackboard courses, purloined for power point presentations, plastered across Facebook walls, appropriated by activist websites, even travestied in You Tube mash-ups. This dispersed authorship and destabilized texts beyond our wildest deconstructionist dreams. My favorite application is "Graffiti" which allows users to scrawl irreverent comments across our most pious footage. Aghast video librarians report that 50% of the uses of Newsreel titles now consist of segments of ten minutes or less. In light of this, the continuing relevance of long-form documentary in education and organizing might be a fruitful topic for research. What has become evident is that without knowing it, Newsreel is mutating from a film distributor to a moving image database.

It is perhaps surprising, given Newsreel's proximity to Silicon Valley and chiliastic proclivities that we did not more enthusiastically embrace the "Digital Revolution." But we remain technological skeptics not determinists. During our four decades, we have witnessed too many self-proclaimed telecommunications revolutions not to come to the perhaps cynical conclusion that new technology replicates more than it reforms the

dominant discourses of the society implementing it.[6] This may explain why Second Life, by and large, bears such a disappointing resemblance to this one. It is, of course, as easy to be sucked into virtual as cinematic space; the choice of spaces may have increased but they still tend to be any place but here.

Nonetheless, the site of reception has changed irrevocably into a distributed, shifting skein of IP addresses and the screen might better be described as a user interface. These user-generated spaces, dubbed neo-geography or participatory topology, would include everything from a neighborhood wiki mapping the social coordinates of San Francisco's Mission District to twitter-based crowd-sourcing during the London G-20 summit last Spring. Locative technologies - mobile phones, i-Pods, laptops, wifi, GPS imaging, Google Earth, teleconferencing, even surveillance video – are producing an increasingly hybrid experience of space, where in the words of the *Katha Upanishad*, "Here is always there and there is always here."

A current Newsreel project, deliberately modest in scale, uses locative technology to politicize space, or, since space is already politicized, to create a place where space itself becomes the subject of politics. The idea behind the jargon of political topology is, as so often the case, simple: at any given moment, we occupy multiple, over-lapping spaces: our bedroom or office, a city, a nation state, the global economy, the earth's ecosystem, a remote corner of the universe, a memory or a reverie. Newsreel is collaborating with the labor-based Anti-Sweatshop Coalition and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on a site-specific installation and related website. The project will juxtapose or rather superimpose a "space of consumption" and a "space of production." The former will be focused on a spot-lighted display of museum tee-shirts in the center of a room with the exact latitude and longitude and museum floor plan on the ceiling. In the middle of each dimmed wall, monitors will glow, fed by webcams placed in a Punjabi spinning mill, the run-off sump of a dye plant near Delhi, a garment factory in San Francisco's Chinatown and a data processing center across the Bay in Oakland. A crawl will run across each monitor with data describing that location. Cotton thread will be strewn around the floor, enmeshing the visitor in a web. The over-obvious point is the tension or pull between the central display and the wall monitors, between the normatized, decontextualized white box of the gallery and the ubiquitous, but largely invisible, net of global capital. Neither of these contradictory spectatorial spaces, neither the acquisitive or empathetic gaze, endows the visitor with political agency. The viewer, however, is invited to synthesize an overarching, socially-engaged space by texting on the spot their support for an Anti Sweatshop Coalition petition for "fair labor" import standards.

The on-line version of this piece will consist of a homepage with links to the four webcams, a high-end tee-shirt storefront, a GPS image of the downloader's own location and the petition site. The page will be configured to allow simultaneous views of two or more links. This is a primitive version of "augmented reality" applications already widely available in Europe. These essentially overlay a cell phone image with layers of contextualizing data, including user-generated "wikitude," (an especially unfortunate neologism.) Where most software pulls its users out of circumambient space, this

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[6] These include hand-held 16mm cameras, portapaks, VHS cassettes, multi-channel cable-casting, public access television, digital cameras and editing software, the dot.com boom/bust, viral and "Free" digital distribution….

software has the potential to shift and deepen how people perceive and engage that space.

I make no claims for Newsreel's tentative first steps into the digital future; subtlety and elegance have never been our strong suit. We look to a younger, more nimble generation of "digital natives" to work outside the box - or coffin - of documentary space.. They are already not just pushing the envelope but opening it by erecting anti-architectures, deconstructing space as a pre-condition for its reconstruction. Such porous hyperspaces can expose the invisible social structures imbricating the viewer - and the open sky beyond. Here, documentary space becomes both immanent and plastic and present, past and future interpenetrate. Caroline Jones has aptly named such subjunctive, proleptic topologies not utopias, literally no places, but "*alter*-topias," yet-to-be-realized places [7]
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Some have argued we may be entering a post-documentary age, an age of self-documenting, of documentary ephemera, as instantly disposable as the present – which they increasingly constitute. For example, compulsive Facebook posting, twittering and texting could be seen as awkward, adolescent attempts at self-expression and community, betraying a certain desperate anomie. When advertising is the paradigmatic communication discourse, we should not be surprised that social networking tends to agglutinate attention-seeking individualists rather than forge grassroots political movements.

What role remains for the documentary impulse in the over-flowing semiotic dumpsite of cyberspace? First, not to add to it; to resist the lure of content, the lubricious leer of the lens, that rapt, rapturous raptor, the dark heart of documentary and perhaps the photographic image itself. Bill Nichol's has called this *epistiphilia*, the love but also the temptation of meaning - both on our part and our audience's. As Sharon Daniels has helpfully suggested, media makers could begin to think of themselves as context rather than content providers, creators of off and on-line sites where social space can be performed or rather improvised. Every site, every application, like every discourse, has an implicit intentionality, a being-toward-the world, as it were, which necessarily re-contextualizes any content. Thus, there is an urgent need for databases and applications which help their users' expand the space for collective agency, which offer not just more choices but more socially instrumental choices. Transcending the sterile dichotomy between positivist realism and disempowered subjectivism, these tools could project what might be termed anticipatory space. In this light, documentary space could only be located in the ability of people to imagine and construct it.

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[7] Caroline A. Jones, "The Mediated Sensorium, in *Sensorium,* ed. Jones (Cambridge:MIT Press, 2006), 42