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Prospectus For

Documentary Film and Social Change: A Rhetorical Investigation of Dissent

Angela J. Aguayo

Abstract

For well over a century, non-fiction film has figured prominently in the public sphere as a powerful means of persuasion. My dissertation will explore the intersection of cultural texts and social change by investigating the history of contemporary activist documentary film. Using all the available means of persuasion and coercion at their disposal, social movements have collectively developed a diverse set of tactics and strategies to prompt social change. Among these documentary films deserve scholarly attention.

Documentary films that reflect the interests of social movements are important but to what ends and in what rhetorical situations are these strategies most effective for social change? This study will not call into question the importance of cultural texts like documentary film, but rather will explore how constitutive cultural strategies constrain or aid the instrumental goals of contemporary social movements. In this dissertation I will argue that mediated, politically driven and aesthetically dressed activist documentary film and video not only has the potential to be an act of political oratory but under the correct conditions can transform into a public communication between private people that has the potential for social change. This project will explore the commitments of early activist media, theories of social change, the second wave of activist media and finally, the function of contemporary activist documentary.

There is much left to be studied about the relationship of activist cultural texts and social change. The manner in which activist documentary film is conceptualized in theoretical literature or in film reviews, primarily qualifies the term “activist” with the intentions of the film maker and his or her ideological commitments outside of

filmmaking. There is, however, another tendency to label documentary film as “activist” based on content. If the film mediates as political or moral controversy, the inclination is to label it “activist.” However, such labels are fruitless if the film does not actually intervene in a larger public space to create active political agents that will extend and execute the political work initiated by documentary film. It is not enough for documentary film to “be” activist; it must help in creating the space for activism and invested in producing material and cultural change.

Introduction and Rationale for Project

Postmodern social critic Fredric Jameson argues that after World War II, a new society began to emerge. Jameson refers to a society invested in creating meaning and understanding through cultural texts such as music and film (19). Prior to this period, theorists and artists alike had placed a great deal of import on the potential of high art—as opposed to popular cultural texts—to influence political subjects. Although social theorists may disagree about why popular cultural texts play a significant role in meaning production, few can deny the impact and mass consumption of culture in the contemporary public sphere.

If cultural texts play a significant role in meaning production, how can these texts function in the process of social change? In social movements theory, a significant debate ensues around the function of cultural strategies utilized in the process of social change. In his article Culture and Social Movements, Doug McAdam argues that there is a significant “rationalist” and “structural” bias in the studies of social movements that deny the impact of culture on the process of social change. Until recently, he argues, “culture in all of its manifestations, was rarely invoked by American scholars as a force in the emergence and development of social movements” (37).

While scholars like McAdam insist that cultural forces have been ignored in the process of studying social movements, others insist that cultural strategies are the primary means of social change for an era of new social movements that began to emerge out of the 1960s. With the emergence of “new social movements,” Alberto Melucci argues that constitutive cultural strategies are the primary and the most important acts of contemporary social movements,

Conflicts [of new social movements] do not chiefly express themselves through action designed to achieve outcomes in the political system. Rather, they raise a challenge that recasts the language and cultural codes that organize information. The ceaseless flow of messages only acquire meaning through the codes that order the flux and allow its meaning to be read. The forms of power now emerging in contemporary societies are grounded in an ability to 'inform' that is, to 'give form.' (102)

As a result, the production of cultural texts that challenge important language and cultural codes of the institutions of power, according to Melucci, is the primary political moment to be seized.

For well over a century, non-fiction film has figured prominently in the public sphere as a powerful means of persuasion. In 1928, Stalin attempted to coordinate documentary film content with political goals. During World War II, the United States government heavily invested in documentary bugle-call films, designed to sell war to soldiers and teetering allies. The Nazi party had a documentary film unit, at times headed by Leni Riefenstahl, to bring highly aestheticized images of political practices to the masses (Barnouw 99-182).

More recently, after winning an Academy Award for best documentary in 2003, Michael Moore ignited a firestorm of controversy by denouncing President Bush and the war on Iraq to a 33 million-person television audience. Moore, responsible for making one of the most commercially successful political documentaries of all time, recognizes that the Oscars are not normally a place for political commentary (United Press International, March 28, 2003). After receiving a robust round of boos and cheers, Moore

defended his actions by stating, “[I]f I had won the Oscar for a movie about birds or insects, I’d say something about them. But I made a movie about violence—and global violence—so I felt I had to say something about that. I just hope I generated a discussion about Mr. Bush and the war” (Salt Lake Tribune, March 29, 2003). In popular culture, documenting reality or a derivative of it, has become the new hip form of media entertainment.

More than just a new hip form of media entertainment, the genre has significant rhetorical implications. Documentary film “can perform many of the actions for which language is used—warning, asserting, identifying, informing, ridiculing, critiquing, ect” (Plantinga 1). The documentary genre marries three distinct speech acts, image, sound and word. These speech acts, employed in the package of an entire documentary film or video text, makes understanding the rhetorical aspects of the documentary genre quite complicated.

Yet, the most interesting facet of documentary at the turn of the 21st century is non-fiction film and video pragmatics. Study of non-fiction film and video as a pragmatic art is to investigate the rhetorical process of documentary to perform various social tasks. However, there is a paucity of research that attempts to understand documentary film history as an instrumental rhetorical text, which means conceptualizing documentary film as a force of social change. Theoretically, there is much left to be studied concerning the speaker (filmmaker)-text (documentary)-audience dynamic of documentary film. By studying this rhetorical relationship, scholars may come closer to understanding of the civic, social and political functions of documentary film.

This project will explore the intersection of cultural texts and social change by investigating a history of activist documentary film. Using all the available means of persuasion and coercion at their disposal, social movements have collectively developed a diverse set of tactics and strategies to prompt social change, documentary films being one of the most understudied texts. Thus, there are several questions to be answered about the pragmatic functions of activist documentary film and video. What is activist documentary film and video? Documentary films that reflect the interests of social movements are important but to what end and in what rhetorical situation are these strategies most effective for social change? What role does documentary film play in a larger political program for social change? Does activist documentary only publicize social injustice or does it act as an instrumental rhetorical text? How do actually existing counter-publics function to create social change, from or with, documentary film? In what manner does the rhetorical tradition stand to enrich documentary film studies? This study will not call into question the importance of cultural texts like documentary film but rather how constitutive cultural strategies constrain or aid the instrumental goals of contemporary social movements. In this dissertation I will argue that mediated, politically driven and aesthetically dressed activist documentary film and video not only has the potential to be an act of political oratory but under the correct conditions can transform into a public communication between private people that has the potential for social change.

The manner in which activist documentary film is conceptualized in theoretical literature or in film reviews, primarily qualifies the term “activist” with the intentions of the film maker and his or her ideological commitments outside of filmmaking. There is,

however, another tendency to label documentary film as “activist” based on content. If the film mediates as political or moral controversy, the inclination is to label it “activist.” Some documentary films articulate the experience of a marginalized group, which is a legitimate cultural need. However, such labels are fruitless if the film does not actually intervene in a larger public space to create active political agents that will extend and execute the political work initiated by documentary film. It is not enough for documentary film to “be” activist; it must help in creating the space for activism and invested in producing material and cultural change. By studying activist documentary films, it is my intention to develop an instrumental rhetorical theory that better explains the process of social change.

This project will explore non-fiction texts that most closely engage—whether in practice or method—the activist documentary impulse. Initially, John Geieron is widely noted as the father of documentary film. He was the most vocal about the potential of documentary to create social change. Geieron has been widely studied, however, his work has not been studied in relationship to other moments of activist filmmaking. The study of his work will be coupled with the first activist video collective, The Workers Film and Photo League. This was the first social movement to coordinate political dissent with the recording of a documentary text. During the second wave of activist documentary in the 1960s, the impulse to coordinate filmmaking with political protest morphed and changed. New strategies and technological innovation altered the manner in which filmmakers like Fredrick Wiseman approached the documentation of social issues. Analysis of the 1960s counter-publics will illuminate Geieron’s contribution and how video collectives evolved from the objectives of the Workers Film and Photo League into

the guerilla television movement. Finally, this project will focus more specifically on the contemporary approaches to documentary film and social change. This will involve looking at high profile activist documentary films such as Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills (1996) and its sequel Paradise Lost Revisited (2000), both screened on HBO. In addition, the project will focus on the work and rhetoric of activist filmmaker, Michael Moore. Coincidentally, at the turn of this century, the guerilla television impulse was re-born into the activist internet video movement. As a result, this project will study the most successful, self-publishing activist media collective on the internet, the Independent Media Center.

This is an especially timely project given that at the turn of this century, documentary films are becoming more visible and politically viable in public life. Since the inception of non-fiction film at the turn of the 20th century, documentary film has routinely played a supporting role to its more famous relative, fiction film. However, during the past century documentary film has figured prominently in the public sphere as a powerful means of persuasion utilized by governments, rich patrons, academics and working people alike. A myriad of historical and social contextual circumstances have situated the documentary genre in a unique historical exigence at the turn of the 21st century. It is the rebirth of the activist documentary impulse. Consequently, a hundred years of documentary film history has resulted in numerous approaches to production, a significant audience and has given birth to a new field of inquiry, documentary film studies (Nichols, 2001, xiv).

Text and Historical Context

With the infancy of travel at the turn of the 20th century, documentary film functioned as a window to the world. The innovators of documentary film were anthropologists, ethnographers, explorers and showmen. Early documentary film exposed the audience to places foreign and unknown, such as the “Coronation of Nicholas II” in Russia or the “Melbourne Races” in Australia. But documentary film, in the early days, also functioned as a mirror: “The idea was to lure people to the shows in hope of seeing themselves—which they sometimes did (Barnouw 11).” Documentary film has served various functions in the last century, often dictated by historical exigence.

The First Wave of Activist Documentary

In the early part of the 1930s, economic collapse had festered and produced significant political tension and strife. Media outlets were dominated by discourse concerning political ideology. At this moment, the practice of documentary film technology had just acquired sound and celebrated the last moments of silent film. For the first time, spoken word could be added to image. It is at this moment that documentary film enters into the arena of social change for the first time. However, documentary films of the 1930s are part of a larger body of cultural discourse that has accompanied the efforts to accomplish grassroots social change in media during this time.

In his book The Cultural Front, Michael Denning addresses the cultural strategies of the labor movement in the United States that took root in the 1930s: “The thirties became an icon, the brief moment when politics captured the arts, when writers went left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians and photographers were socially minded” (xvi). This cultural front “reshaped American culture. Just as the radical movements of

abolition, utopian socialism, and women's rights sparked the antebellum American Renaissance, so the communisms of the depression triggered a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture—the laboring of American Culture” (xvi).

Some of the most rudimentary forms of activist documentary film were born during the time Denning identifies as “The Cultural Front.” Leading the charge was John Grierson. While studying at the University of Chicago, Grierson traveled around the United States interviewing filmmakers, scholars, politicians and journalists but above all observed the workings of the American melting pot. He, like many of his contemporaries, began to question the expectations of what seemed like an illusory democracy in the United States. According to Grierson, social problems had grown beyond the comprehension of most citizens and their participation was non-existent, apathetic or perfunctory. At the same time, Grierson believed that the popular media could acquire leverage over ideas and actions once influenced by church and school. It became Grierson's mission to produce films that dramatized issues and their implications in a meaningful way. It was his hope that documentary could lead citizens through the political wilderness (Barnouw 85).

There are several reasons why Grierson's work began the groundwork for activist documentary film. Overall, his approach to the production and distribution of documentary film was unique. Instead of conceptualizing the documentary film experience as one of consumption and entertainment, he believed documentary film could be instrumental. He claimed that the medium had the potential to change people and institutions, specifically documentary could inform a citizenry and improve a crumbling

democracy. In his film The Drifters (1929), Grierson set out to bring the work of herring fishermen to life in manner that astonished audiences in packed theater houses.

According to Eric Barnouw, a prominent media historian, “There was nothing doctrinally radical about it, but the fact that British workingmen—virtually ignored by British cinema except as comedy material—were the heroes, gave the film an revolutionary impact” (Barnouw 88). The work had given a new dignity to the workingman and provided a critique of production new to the documentary film genre. In vivid detail, Grierson edits together sequences depicting the relationship between man and machine. His idea was to bring the image of the workingman away from the Edwardian, Victorian, capitalist attitude (90).

During this time, a politically minded documentary film movement was mounting. It was a movement that formed as a collective body and was committed to documenting worker’s strikes, foreclosures, and elections. The Workers Film and Photo League was the first body of activist filmmakers joined by their commitment to document the economic and social crisis of the time. The League was a national group operating in major cities in the 1930s and produced a prolific body of workers newsreels and films. The upshot of this movement was that it managed to bring workers consciousness to the public sphere through documentary film texts and organized collectives around these objectives. However, does documentary film have the potential, as Grierson suggests, to create instrumental social change?

The cultural front was the expansion of social movement consciousness into mediums and texts that were not traditionally read as political. It was the encounter between a powerful democratic social movement and the modern cultural apparatuses of

mass entertainment and education. Denning speaks to social change and the laboring of cultural texts in the 1930s in four distinct ways: 1) the pervasive use of the critique of labor and its synonyms in the rhetoric of the period, 2) the increased participation of working-class Americans in the world of culture and the arts, 3) the new visibility of labor in cultural production through the organization of unions by the workers, including screenwriters and cartoonist and 4) the Cultural Front was a new rhetorical moment, a second American Renaissance (xvi-xvii). Denning recognizes an important aspect of the interaction of cultural texts and social change; there is an important relationship between an activist cultural text and the bodies of people who are agitating on behalf of the issues emphasized in the text.

At this moment, the primary revolutionary impulse for socially minded cultural texts—specifically documentary film—was to acquire visibility for the people and ideas that were situated at the margins of society. It was here that the lives of the working class were placed on display for democratic ends. The assumption of filmmakers like Grierson is that multi-vocality through documentary would provide the missing ingredient for a troubled and homogeneous democracy (86). But are activist cultural strategies, as Mulucci suggests, designed to constitute the audience, organize information and acquire new meaning through cultural codes, enough? Utilizing the literature on the public sphere theory, the following section of this project will analyze the second wave of activist documentary film that grew significantly out of the political and social strife of the 1960s.

The Second Wave of Activist Documentary

The spark for the second wave of activist documentary film began in the late 1950s and was reacting against an era of documentary that was closely tied to corporate sponsorship and interests. In this moment of capitalist expansion, instead of corporations producing to meet demand they were working to increasing the desire for demand through the documentary film genre. During the first decade after World War II, corporate sponsored documentaries rose to 4,000 a year while news media outlets, dependent on advertising, kept strict control over broadcast documentary film content (Barnouw 219).

Reacting to an era of promoting cooperate interests, filmmakers of the 1960s began embracing the role as observer. The films of this period—often called direct cinema—were ambiguous, leaving conclusions to viewers yet the content often poked into places that society was inclined to ignore or keep hidden. Fred Wiseman, lawyer turned filmmaker, was one of the most masterful documentaries of the direct cinema genre: “He selected institutions through which society propagates itself, or which cushion—and therefore reflect—it’s strains and tensions. All of his films became studies in the exercise of power in American Society—not at the high levels, but at the community level.” (Barnouw 244). In his film Titicut Follies (1967) he created a portrait of the Massachusetts institute for the criminally insane. Although the state of Massachusetts attempted to block the film through legal action because the fear of political embarrassment, Wiseman argued that if state institutions receive tax funds from citizens then they have the right to know what happens in them. Additionally, in his film High School (1968) he compiled several months of footage and edited the footage as

though it was one day in the life of the subjects. Using perspective by incongruity, visually he contrasted the ideology of American public schools—the egalitarian approach to education designed to collapse the distinctions between rich and poor—against images of bored and apathetic students inclined to rebel against their instructors.

The liberating potential of this genre is that 1) it gave legitimacy to groups at the margins of society but it also 2) exploded the rhetorical potentialities of documentary by foregrounding the ideas and speech of the film subjects. Unlike the earlier era of activist documentary film where the filmmaker—often the narrator—could manipulate footage to create their own arguments, the methodological commitments of direct cinema demanded that subjects speak for themselves:

In the new focus on speech—talking people—documentaries were moving into an area they had long neglected, and which appeared to have surprising, even revolutionary impact. Since the advent of sound—throughout the 1930s and 1940s—documentaries had seldom featured talking people, except in brief static scenes (Barnouw 234)

Now film subjects, with the help of technology that recorded synchronized sound and image, took significant interpretive control out of the hands of the editor. It was during this moment that the vernacular voice of marginalized communities began to take root in documentary film.

The function of direct cinema was to bear witness and to place judgment in the hands of the audience. Although the activist moment for direct cinema is limited by the reluctance to be an advocate, the genre began to carve the way for vernacular discourse and the production of documentary films for the average working person. A new

movement in activist documentary was mounting. The trend was percolating away from observation and towards intervention. Filmmakers came out from behind the camera and intervened in the world around them. It was a movement that did not conceptualize the intervention of the filmmaker as a limitation, rather, as a political catalyst of social change.

The cinema verite approach to documentary film was highly experimental and committed to the pursuit of truth. Direct cinema documentaries would take the camera to a situation of tension and hope for a crisis, as opposed to cinema verite filmmakers were committed to intervention and precipitation of circumstances. The movement involved abandoning the shroud of objectivity for an instrumental public text. This was a radical reconceptualization of documentary film and social change. Instead of conceptualizing the moment of social change as one of constitution, like Grierson whose pursuit for multi-voice in documentary hoped to repair a crippled citizenry, the cinema verite movement moved to publicize and intervene in political dissent. In a move critical to the development of an activist documentary genre, cinema verite filmmakers acknowledged a direct goal for social change “outside” the film screenings, often political demonstrations and films were planned in conjunction with one another in order further the goals of counter-publics agitating in the public sphere.

Given the impulse of direct cinema to foreground vernacular voices and the commitment of cinema verite practitioners to intervene in the project of political dissent, documentary film and social change found new feet. In the early 1960s heightened political crisis and the development of low-cost video technology created the breeding ground for a new population of filmmakers. This time, the people from the margins were

making their own film and activists were creating their own media. It was the birth of activist documentary film and video movement.

According to Deirdre Boyle in her book Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited, the activist video movement began with the development of lightweight, affordable and portable video recording equipment in the early 1970s. This gave the baby boomers access to the resources to make their own brand of television (Boyle VI). This “new brand of television,” also called guerrilla television, was part of a larger alternative media tide that swept across the country during the 1960s. For a generation that grew up in the shadows of the civil rights and anti-war movements, television had been the window to the world. Troubled by the political and social unrest of the 1960s, the guerrilla television movement focused on a utopian program to change the structure of information in America by creating a distinct parallel broadcast system: “Optimism about television and its dynamic impact not just on communications but on contemporary consciousness was seized by the first generation raised on television, who found ... a euphoric explanation of themselves and their changing times [in television]” (Boyle 13). Television, technological innovation and the political unrest of the 1960s had re-directed the potential of activist media to create social change. However, the political moment was potentially misguided. Instead of mobilizing around political issues, activist mobilized around video collectives whose objectives were to democratize access to technology. Political contestation was solved “not by directly assaulting the system—as in a political revolution—but by extending the unifying properties of electronic media to everyone” (Boyle 31).

For example, in 1972 New York's Downtown Community Television Center (DCTV) was founded by Jon Alpert and Keiko Tsuno. In the past, Alpert has worked as a taxi driver in a multi-ethnic area. Together Alpert and Keiko produced a documentary about the taxi unions and issues of exploitation facing taxi drivers. Seeing their lives mirrored in video, the citizens became excited about the potential of television to find an audience for their concerns. As a result, Alpert and Keiko launched free training sessions in video production in three languages. The work that emerged out of DCTV was produced in 15 languages and received by stations in various parts of the world (Barnouw 289). The movement attempted to shift television's content from placid entertainment and negative images of youthful protest to counter-cultural values and a new television reality, "fueled by adolescent rebellion and utopian dreams, video promised an alternative to the slickly civilized, commercially corrupt, and aesthetically bankrupt world of [broadcast] television"(Boyle 4). The aim of portable video movement "was 'guerrilla warfare' insofar as it enabled citizens to fight the 'perceptual imperialism of broadcast television' on a small scale in what was then an irregular war"(30). But how do counter-publics create social change through texts?

The focus on building community and access to resources was the primary goal of activist video movement in the 1960s and 1970s: "[G]uerrilla television was configured not as a weapon, but as a cultural tool bringing people together" (Boyle 30). By giving people access to tools that allowed them to document their lives and negotiate the world on their own terms, the movement created a vernacular space that countered the prevailing dominant ideology of broadcast television: "[V]ideo could involve people by making them active participants in the "video environment" rather than passive viewers

of network TV fare...video's potential [was] to offer people a variety of viewpoints rather than the official, objective one promoted by Walter Cronkite's 'And That's the Way It Is'"(6). However, this strategy was more concerned with "appearing in public" as opposed to "acting in public." Attempting to avoid the ideological warfare on broadcast television, early video activist like Frank Gillette commented that he was not imposing his structure on people rather he was letting people "give their raps on tape" (7). In addition, the movement located the political moment of social change in the identity of counter-publics (on a good day) but mostly in the identity of an individual(s) within a counter-public. Given the abandonment of instrumental political goals, the new breed of video activist was primarily concerned with the effects of constitutive strategies of social change.

Consequently, any instrumental platform for social change was lost or at best not made a priority in the early activist video movement at the expense of developing a community and culture with finite human resources. Marco Vassi, an active member in the early video scene commented on the environment of a grassroots video collective: "We sit stoned and dig each other's worldview. We rap and eat and fuck and watch tape. And for us, it's about the same as it has always been: just living fully; openly, honest to what is" (Boyle 11). The political moment was primarily constitutive—in that it was concerned with disseminating multiple viewpoints and developing a counter-political community through identity and not necessarily committed to agitational forces that may better guarantee the redistribution of economic resources that are also at the foundation of oppression and marginalization. As a result, the movement failed to reach its objective of radical social change: "As a part of the counter-culture, guerrilla television helped

raise a critique of American Society that went beyond the bounds of the political Left, even if it missed essential leftist insights about power, economic exploitation, and class” (191).

Many early activist videotapes fell under the heading of street tapes in which activist videotexts placed people in their living rooms, bedrooms and the streets for the first time with the help of portable video equipment. The videos primarily addressed those who were a part of the community and not those who resided outside. Images of massive protest mean very little if one was not aligned with the commitments of those agitating for social change. Haphazardly, the early activist video movement became a community in itself and not a community for itself.

The guerrilla television movement asserted that “no alternative cultural vision could succeed without its own alternative information structure, not just alternative content pumped across the existing system... guerrilla television would coexist with broadcasting, restoring balance to the ‘media ecology’ of America” (Boyle 33). The video activist counter-public was separatist in orientation not because of its commitment to a distinct parallel broadcast system but the drive towards producing isolating content through videotexts. The movement did not attempt to dialectically engage the audience of the public sphere outside the activist community. At some point, counter-cultural interests must engage or speak to dominant hegemonic interests. The video activist work needed to create a massive viewership in the public sphere to stay afloat. But they also needed to engage in persuasive appeals that met the audience at the point of stasis between counter-cultural interests and dominate hegemonic discourse.

Although the second wave of the activist documentary movement conceptualized social change outside of the film screening, the movement primarily concentrated on identity and consciousness raising strategies. The video activist movement had a commitment to consciousness raising that implicates discourse as the site of social change:

Once the critical moment of consciousness is reached, evolution becomes a psychosocial process based on the cumulative transition of experience. Video theorists would read a role for themselves in Teilhard's universe as disseminators of 'video data banks' of experience. Even higher degrees of organization and new patterns of cooperation would lead to the ultimate good of global unity. Love, good will, and cooperation; personal integration and internal harmony; and increasing knowledge lay at the end of this evolutionary/spiritual quest...some of the best motives of the video underground reflected this cosmic vision. (Boyle 12)

In practice, the production of documentary for enlightenment, identity and a sense of community ignored the economic redistribution interest also necessary for love and harmony, not to mention social change.

Reflecting on the objectives of the activist video movement, Marco Vassi remarked, activist documentary filmmakers must realize "that all their complex equipment is just so much metal junk, toys and tools, which have no more worth than the hands and hearts of the people who work them" (Boyle 29). Therefore, a new set of objectives is needed in order to create an activist video movement. Given the previous historical movements in which social crisis and documentary film have collided, a new movement must be invested in developing rhetorically astute social criticism that creates

the public space for viewers to develop social organizations. An activist documentary audience should be drawn to facilitating critical-rational debate in the public sphere and to act instrumentally to alleviate injustices foregrounded in the text. The activist film and video movement must be less concerned with developing community to appear in public and more concerned about acting in public in order to create a space for social change in a larger political public sphere. Much like the early cinema verite filmmakers of 50 years ago, activist documentary filmmakers must intervene in the world around them.

The Third Wave of Activist Filmmaking

This section will focus on the potential of documentary film as a medium for creating public deliberation and instrumental political change by analyzing the third wave of activist documentary film beginning in the 1990s to the present. The cultural front in the 1930s began a rich history of leftist social critique through cultural texts that continues to influence the political landscape through documentary film. The third wave of activist documentary began planting roots in the late 1980s and extends upon the strategies Denning identifies in *The Cultural Front*. The strategies and approach to social change are varied and numerous. During this time there was a proliferation of union films that depicted a societal transition in worker-management relations. Films like Barbra Kopple's *American Dream* (1990) were portraits of living with American workers through crisis. Community access channels in the rising cable market continued to produce an interesting range of activist programming from teaching media literacy through "Herbert Schiller Read the New York Times" to the expansion of parallel broadcast networks like Paper Tiger TV.

Filmmaker Michael Moore developed one genre, a mixture of cinema verite, guerilla documentary and personal film essay. His works Roger and Me (1989) and Bowling for Columbine (2002) have played a significant role in contemporary activist documentary. However, Moore's work is strategically different from much of the activist documentary films that came before him. Unlike the second wave of activist documentary that characterized social change as fight between surly commercial broadcasting and activist media, the new struggle for power is issue driven. In fact, much of contemporary activist media is at home in the slick world of corporate broadcasting which is dependent on maintaining a loyal viewership. Therefore, the strategy of third wave activist documentary is to place films in major distribution houses for the maximum audience without compromising film content.

What is specific about the third wave of activist documentary is that it coincides with the development of a new computer technology, the internet. Much like the developments in recording technology and television drastically altered the project of activist documentary, the internet provides a new addendum to the process of cultural texts and social change.

There has been a paucity of research concerning the implications of the internet for public sphere theory and practice. As Catherine Palczewski suggests, "[D]iscussions of the internet have not attended to the developments in social movements and protest theory, particularly to counter-public sphere theory. As a result, internet studies replicate both traditional studies' focus on the state and modernist' limited understanding of political participation" (162). We have learned from the previous moments of activist documentary that particular aspects of modernist understanding of political participation

are critical, if social change is the objective. The internet may alter the traditional process of political participation by overcoming the limitations of the geographical divide and the limited access of information resources between activists, even multiplying the strategies of agitation. However, collective instrumental politics of agitation must not be abandoned for new and innovative strategies through the internet. Living breathing bodies are a necessary part of social change. Not to mention that accountability and agitation is still best done in person. The strategies must be brought together in order to expand the potential of the public sphere for the process of social change. One way that the public sphere and the internet are being brought together is through activist documentary film.

Under the common denominator of human interests, Jurgen Habermas argues that “mixtum compositum” emerges. In other words, aesthetically pleasing mass media texts are created to communicate pleasant and convenient entertainment. Profit motive encourages the substitutes of reality for a more palatable representation. The consumption of these texts only give rise to impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation rather than public use of reason (170). However, looking at the HBO documentary films Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills (1996) and its sequel Paradise Lost Revisited (2000), the exact opposite occurred. Both films’ chronicle a murder trial in Arkansas in which three teenage boys are convicted of killing three adolescent boys. The first film documents the trial while the second film reflects on the first films impact on the trial. There is a significant question as to whether the convicted are guilty and an instrumental social movement has developed from the viewership of the first film.

As depicted in the second film, a group of viewers in Los Angeles began meeting on a regular basis to deliberate about the facts of the case after they watched the first film

Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills. This group in Los Angeles began to research the case, share information, and gather on a regular basis to engage in what Habermas calls public communication in the private sphere. As one movie reviewer notes, “No documentary released in 1996 challenges an audience the way this one does. The questions it proposes are profound, and there are no answers. Paradise Lost is one of the very few films that completely absorb the attention [of the audience]. Watching Berlinger and Sinofsky’s movie is like witnessing an execution: it’s horrifying, gut-wrenching, and impossible to turn away from (Berardinelli).” The movie acted as a catalysis for social change by creating the environment for a public concerned with miscarriages of justice while creating rhetorical identification with the convicted, “The West Memphis Three.” In the film’s absence, counter-narratives silenced in the official court hearings or by the corporate media would have never proliferated in a significant way. Hence, the documentary film acts as a means for counter-publics to create social change by transferring discourse from the private to the counter-public sphere.

The film not only avoided a more pleasant and palatable entertainment platform, as Habermas suggests, but turned passive consumers of communication into deliberating agents. These agents, collectively turned public communication in the private sphere into political communication in the counter-public sphere by sharing their evidence of the case on a public website, gathering support internationally with a postcard petition, and formed an instrumental social movement organization called “Free the West Memphis Three.” In praxis, the “impersonal indulgence” and “relaxation” resulting from the consumption of aesthetics in the mass media prove unfounded. The internet has the

potential to unite unlikely citizens because it provides the medium to overcome geographical distance between activists and facilitate critical-rational debate.

In the second film, Paradise Lost Revisited the most active members of the social movement, “Free the West Memphis Three,” talked candidly about viewing the first movie. The film provoked a strong sense of identification with the teenage young boys convicted of murder. One man says:

A typical scenario people go through when they first join the [internet] list is ‘I watched Paradise Lost. I also wore black t-shirts. I was an alienated teenager.’ And I think that might be the initial attraction that brings people in. But what I think is really important and that brings people together to the point where you will travel across country to come to Jonesborough, Arkansas on your week of vacation, are more important issues such as justice...such as a corrupt, incompetent police force and justice system working in a vacuum here in Arkansas when no one is watching. That is why I am here. I don’t want them to think they can operate in the dark (Paradise Lost Revisited).

The films functioned rhetorically in a way that provided an essential form of identification with the audience. However, the result was not the curtailing of rational criticism that Habermas predicted (172). Rather, private citizens in the public sphere constructed a systematic analysis through critical rational debate on the internet and in person that identified the institutions of law and order as the sites of practical blame for the derailing of justice. More importantly, the medium of documentary film has the ability to create counter-publics.

Another way that the public sphere and the internet are being brought together with documentary video is through the resurgence of street tapes and activist video collectives. The internet is a medium most closely associated with e-mail and e-commerce. As a result, the development of web-based communication has slowly urbanized into a new breeding ground for low cost advertising and marketing. However, a new movement, with democratic motives and not all concerned with profit margins, is utilizing the potential of internet communication for slightly different ends. Perhaps the most significant and sweeping site for activist internet journalism of late is the Independent Media Center. Touted as the “newest phenomenon to hit the political scene,” the Independent Media Center has become a “surprising effective news organization” (wired.com) that includes thousands of volunteer reporters in 37 cities in the United States and 45 locations around the world. It is an internet based activist video movement “born out of protest against corporate interests and governments’ role in globalization. It is a movement that has joined diverse groups, from grassroots organizations to labor unions.”(Globe and mail). The Independent Media Center is the newest version of a larger activist video movement—committed to the marriage of low format sound and video technology with activism—that began in the early 1960s and has been revitalized in the later 1990s.

Activist internet journalism developed roots in 1999 during the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. The meeting of the WTO spawned one of the largest and most cohesively organized instances of social protests in recent decades. Tens of thousands traveled to Seattle from around the world to protest the World Trade Organization’s meeting to discuss the possibility of further opening economic markets.

While the *Seattle Times* invited guest columnist like U.S. Secretary of Commerce William Daley and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner to write for the paper, the internet based Independent Media Center was reporting a far different story.

On their internet website, The Independent Media center reported over 1 million hits during the WTO meeting while streamlining stories investigated by the IMC volunteers and captured with donated video and audio equipment. The volunteers—many of them WTO protestors themselves—logged footage around the clock of protest events and street interviews with everyone from black dress anarchist to the police. The stories emphasized the concerns of the protestors and functioned as a means to bear witness to the numerous acts of police brutally waged in an effort to control the crowds. Such stories included a “man who said he had been hit in the face with rubber bullets fired by police. Another [story] showed police firing canisters of tear gas into a crowd” (salon.com). The images from the street reported by the Independent Media Center were reminiscent of a military invasion while the *Seattle Times* published stories from Clinton Administration that justified the WTO meeting.

Text

This project will analyze documentary text from three different yet similar moments in history. In the 1930s, the late 1960s and at the turn of this century, filmmakers and theorists negotiated the function of documentary film for civic purposes. Coincidentally, technological innovation at these particular historical moments of social crisis, called documentary film into the arena of social change. As a result, this project

will focus on documentary film and video that most closely engages the spaces and ideas where documentary film and social change converge.

Analysis of the first wave of documentary and social change will include works by John Geier and the Workers Film and Photo League. The trajectory of the second wave of activist documentary film will foreground the major strategies of activist documentary through the work of Fred Wiseman, an unnamed cinema verite filmmaker and a sampling of street tapes from just about any video collective I can find. Analysis of contemporary activist documentary will include Barbra Kopple's American Dream (1990), the HBO documentaries Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills (1996) and its sequel Paradise Lost Revisited (2000), the works of Michael Moore and the grassroots video reporting on the Independent Media Center website.

These documentary works will be used to answer the proposed research questions by a rigorous analysis of film grammar and context. This project is a multi-method approach that includes interviews with filmmakers and public officials, analysis of the movie text, interviews with members in activist community organizations, analysis of historical materials, and analysis of data distribution patterns.

Method

Where does the propositional content of documentary film come from? How is rhetorical meaning created through cinematic language? The propositional content of documentary text is not nestled in a particular arena, such as the image. Rather, a documentary text is the product of three complex speech acts; moving image, sonic information and spoken word. These speech acts work in conjunction with one another and perform many of the same actions for which language is used. This project will

explore how documentary films create meaning through the grammar of the moving image, the persuasiveness of the sonic track and the argument of the discursive text. Each of these complex speech acts operates in concert with one another to perform deliberative, epideictic and forensic functions in the public sphere with documentary film texts.

Alone, each of these speech acts—image, sound and word—is communicatively effective in distinct ways. For example,

[C]onceptual argument could be communicated more efficiently, if perhaps less powerfully, through words. And words could make explicit the connections and conclusions that remain implicit in the sequence; film images alone may imply or suggest propositions, but cannot assert them with the directness of verbal language. Film without words can communicate conceptual information, but cannot match the efficiency, intricacy, directness, nuance, and complexity of argument that words allow. (Plantinga 73).

Therefore, not only does meaning construction with image, sound and word need to be accounted for but also how these properties work in conjunction with one another to create rhetorical force within a documentary film text.

Many scholars have attempted to explain the rhetorical properties of meaning supplied by still photography (Finnegan 2001; Lucaites and Hariman 2003; Lucaites and Hariman 2001). Composition, framing, the disbursement of light, focus, and angle have all been properties identified as creating meaning within the photographic frame. The work on still images most certainly applies to the context of documentary film. However, documentary texts utilize still as well as moving photographs to create rhetorical impact.

The moving photograph provides a unique set of choices for the rhetor (filmmaker) and distinct opportunities for creating meaning with moving images through concepts such as axis of action, cut-in image movements, eyeline match images, rhythm, following shots and graphic matches between scenes. For scholars concerned about the rhetorical dimensions of documentary, “the real value of moving photographs may be their capacity to provide information unavailable by any other means, and with a force unique to photography. Whereas the context of the image directs the spectator toward preferred meaning (via diverse discursive strategies), the image often exceeds that, providing details that are extraneous to the text’s purpose” (Plantinga 75). Hence, the photograph, moving or still, can provide plentiful detail that exceeds the capacity of language to explain the complex minutia of a given frame with such sensory proficiency. This project will utilize the concepts of still and moving photography to unpack the function and meaning of the image in documentary film and video.

Another powerful component of documentary filmmaking is soundtrack and sonic information. Sound in documentaries can be characterized across two dimensions. Diegetic sounds are the elements recorded in the world of the film, such as voices, the ambient sound in rooms or birds singing near a park bench. Nondiegetic sounds are the elements that do not originate from the film world and are added to the soundtrack during the editing process. Examples of nondiegetic sound are musical accompaniment, voice-over narration and sound effects. Holistically, there are three kinds of sound found in documentary text—spoken word, sound effects and music—all three can be diegetic or nondiegetic (Plantinga 76). The physical qualities of sound can also be assessed in terms

of pitch, loudness and duration (78). The important element, however, is that sound is deployed within the textual system of the documentary for rhetorical purposes (79).

It is important to interrogate the deployment of cinematic language such as the moving image and sonic information. However, these elements are only one part of the rhetorical project of documentary filmmaking. As Carl Plantinga has argued, “There is no single ideological function or effect of photography and sound recording in the nonfiction film; both can be superficial or informative, veridical or misleading, depending on their specific use and context. Theory cannot predict in advance, independent of historical context, the ideological effects of the images” (81). Therefore, the presence of spoken word in a documentary text functions to clarify, explain, direct and advocate for a preferred reading of image and sound evidence.

In the early 1930s, film technology acquired sound. This resulted in the marriage of voice over narration and moving image into a new genre of filmmaking called “documentary.” In the 1960s, the cinema verite movement had influenced documentary filmmakers to foreground the spoken word of the film’s human subjects. For the first time, film subjects were the primary authors of the documentary’s discursive contribution. However, the spoken word in documentary films is one of the most understudied components of this genre. Given that documentary film studies was born and continues to evolve in the film departments of academic universities, the role of the spoken word has taken a back seat to the analysis of image and sound. The study of documentary word text is a critical component of film’s rhetorical force. Hence, rhetorical theory, such as argumentation theory and critical rhetoric, could provide the much-needed understanding of the function of spoken word in documentary films.

Meaning is created through the complex interplay of speech acts in a documentary text. However, the framing of images and the employment of sounds are all creative norms that do not guarantee universal meaning for the filmmaker or the audience in some abstract or sterile way. The meaning of documentary film grammar is always changing and dependent on its placement within a film. Not to mention that recording and editing techniques that help construct the rhetorical dimensions of documentary films are subject to changes in developing technology. Although image, sound and spoken word are the building blocks of rhetorical meaning, documentary film and video also has the potential to become instrumental in the public sphere as a text: “At a global level, film discourse does not passively represent a reality from which it is totally separate. As discourse, it not only itself becomes an element of the actual world, but it has the potential to transform that reality in certain cases, as a part of the cultural discourses which carry on the process of transformation” (Plantinga 45). Therefore, it is important to couple the grammar of image, sound and spoken word with the pragmatic functions of activist documentary films in the public sphere.

Documentary film as a rhetorical force of social change is not a new concept but one that is rarely interrogated by theorists. The critical approach to documentary film studies is to link the close analysis of text to broader questions of social and cultural change. It must situate documentary film in relation to a theorization of social processes as they affect the status of marginalized people. The connections between documentary film and social change cannot be satisfactorily established by means of a subjectivist reading of an individual film, however complicated and sophisticated. The second part of this project will explore film and video pragmatics. Specifically, how and under what

conditions do documentary films intervene in the process of social change, much in the same way speeches once did. In order to explore this phenomenon, it is important to note that documentary film studies and rhetoric is dependent on social theory, which can relate text to changing ideological structures that produce social change.

My methodological/theoretical framework can be defined as ideological criticism. I am part of a group of critical scholars who have embraced Michael McGee's charge to understand the intersection between rhetorical theory and social theory. My approach to rhetorical theory is materialist AND in a pre-Althusserian kind of way. Like the Marxist rhetorician Cloud, I believe "[T]he materialist project [. . .] is a critical perspective that emphasizes that role discourses about race and gender play in larger contexts of social and economic power [. . .] the materialism I am advocating here is insistent upon the need for extra-discursive standards for critical judgment, optimistic about collective human agency, but also critical and cognizant of constraints posed for such agency in class society. This approach is rooted in the classical Marxist tradition, which distinguishes between material reality and discursive reality, positing a dialectical relationship between them" (Cloud "Null Persona" 179-180). As a result, my approach to this work is to posit the analysis meaning created by the grammar of the documentary text against material reality. This material reality includes analysis of 1) historical materials, 2) interviews with filmmakers, activist and public officials and finally, 3) assessment of the distribution pattern of the documentary text.

The political value of activist documentary film can only be determined by its social function in a particular context. In order to ground oppositional politics, a notion of ideology that recognizes the duality of structure is necessary:

[S]tructures are both constituted by human agency and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution. In other words, the relationship between structure and agency is dynamic, not static; human beings do not simply reproduce existing structures in the process of action and communication, but in turn modify those structures even as they are shaped by them. Structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices; structural determinants both influence and are themselves influenced by social action and interaction.

(Felski 56)

A dialectical approach means thinking about documentary film as a force of social change. Activist documentary film as a text “can be understood as both a product of existing social conditions and a form of critical opposition to them” (Felski 1) and this dialectic can be useful in understanding the function of documentary in the process of social change

In line with Terry Eagleton, I believe that hegemony is most successful when some part of it rings true to our experience living in the world. Given the commitment to advocacy and social justice inherent in the development of the documentary genre, this project will not only unpack how meaning is constructed in the film but also attempt to identify for what ends. In his book, Ideology and Modern Culture John B. Thompson proposes several symbolic strategies of hegemony or ways in which meaning serve to establish relations of dominance. He distinguishes five modes in which ideology can operate: legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification (60).

Using the grammar of meaning constructed with image and sound while coupled with a rhetorical analysis of the film text, this project will use the concept of hegemony to

explore how counter-publics use documentary films as a means of social change. However, like Antonio Gramsci, I believe economic interests have significant consequences for the process of social change, rhetoric and the struggle for hegemony in the public sphere. According to Gramsci, "compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity" (161). Therefore, like Nancy Frasier's analysis in Justice Interruptus, social change should be conceptualized and evaluated on several levels, without excluding cultural recognition AND economic redistribution as critical components of social change. Therefore, this project will infuse the conceptual tool of rhetoric with the objectives of documentary film and video pragmatics to better understand the social, civic, and political functions of documentary film.

Simply put, few prior works in communication studies have yet to explore the intersection of documentary film and rhetoric. This topic fills a niche because it is the first attempt to understand the relationship between documentary film and social change as a rhetorical process: the speaker (filmmaker)-audience-text (documentary) relationship. Few works have begun to understand how cultural texts like documentary film function in the process of social change from a rhetorical perspective. I will fill this gap with the proposed research questions, by interrogating the theories of social change in rhetorical theory, intergrading the documentary studies literature, and contributing to the prevailing theoretical trends in rhetorical studies.

The strengths of this methodological/theoretical framework are pragmatic as well as theoretical. I will be able to generate some specific knowledge about how practitioners of

film can better create social change. I will be able to hold the process of social change accountable to economic redistribution AND cultural recognition in the study of rhetoric. Finally and most importantly, I will be able to enrich the rhetorical tradition with the study of documentary films and video. Because the complex marriage of speech acts (image, sound, text) in documentary, rhetorical studies has much to gain from the rich form of the genre and the medium of the text.

Literature Review

Documentary Film Studies

The academic work on documentary film studies is expansive yet disperse. Although the documentary process has been a domain of study since the inception of moving photographs, documentary film as a theoretical subject is a much more recent trend in the last 30 years. What is missing is a conception of the documentary process and theory that investigates the phenomenon as an interactive rhetorical process as opposed to static analysis of history or insights into the production process.

Most coherent work in documentary studies is published in the form of books. There are three types of books in documentary studies: 1) the interview book, 2) the books that provide a theoretical contribution and 3) books of documentary history. Given that documentary studies is not necessarily a clear and established domain of academic study, there are many publications that attempt to shed light on the production process and its filmmakers (Goldsmith 2003, Levin 1971, Rosenthal 1971, Stubbs 2002, Tobias 1998). This work is primarily archival work on an archival process. The insights are interesting and important yet exclusive of understanding the dynamic process on a theoretical and social level. However, there are groups of theorist that have attempted to

build the groundwork of documentary as a theoretical subject of investigation (Barsam 1992, Corner 1996, Guynn 1990, Leach and Sloniowski 2003, Nichols 1991, Nichols 2001, Ponech 1999, Renov 1993, Rosenthal 1998, Vaughan 1999, Waldman and Walker 1999, Warren 1996, Waugh 1984). Many of these works attempt to build conceptual frameworks for the definitions and domain of the documentary process. Most recent theoretical contributions attempt to integrate critical cultural work influenced by post-structuralism such as Lacan with documentary theory (Bruzzi 2000, Grant and Sloniowski 1998, Nichols 1994, Winston 1995).

Finally, the most exhaustive studies of documentary film are those works that attempt to tell the history of documentary film with similar yet different cognitive maps (Aitken 1998, Barnouw 1993, Ellis 1989, Jacobs 1979). These works provide the necessary history to documentary film yet shed only an obscure light on the strategies of documentary film and their effectiveness. There is also a body of work that attempts to focus on documentary film during specific time periods. Consequently most of the work in historical time periods investigates the first wave of expansive documentary filmmaking during the 1930's (Alexander 1981, Hardy 1971). There are some important works beginning to understand the implication of the second wave of activist documentary (Boyle 1997, Rosenthal 1980). However, there has been very little history and theoretical work done on the third wave of activist documentary.

The documentary studies work in periodicals often falls under the same subject headings as books. However, the documentary work in periodicals is much more disparate. Fields like anthropology, library science, history and sociology have attempted to grapple with the phenomenon of documentary film with a given subject field

(Godmilow and Shapiro 1997, Jarvie 1983, Rabinowitz 1993). This body of work produced a scatter plot of methodological approaches as well as theoretical and practical understanding of documentary film. In order to move towards a better understanding of documentary film and social change, documentary studies must further explore the question of film pragmatics. More specifically, focus on how the documentary genre has the potential to perform social tasks (Plantinga 1997).

Rhetoric, Culture and Social Movement Studies

Social theorists—mostly committed to the work in cultural studies—have argued that popular culture is a significant site of struggle for resistance against hegemonic norms in the public sphere. To better understand the theoretical debates that contextualize—historically and theoretically—the process of social change, the following section will review the relevant literature in cultural studies and rhetorical theory.

Early work in Cultural Studies in the 1970s focused on reading cultural texts oppositionally against the state, using the construct of hegemony to understand the process of social change. However, feminist scholarship—mostly influenced by the postmodern intellectual movement—began to theorize that the political moment of cultural texts function primarily by affirming “other” ways of being: “Emphasis shifted from communities positioned against large power blocs and bound together as classes or subcultures to ethnic and women’s groups committed to maintaining and elaborating autonomous values, identities and ethics” (During13) through texts. Theorizing that the text functions as a quasi-political moment displaces the politics of hegemony from the agitational political struggle for the redistribution of economic resources to the discursive

struggle over meaning. The postmodern movement in the academy precipitated the theoretical focus on discursive relationships to understand the process of social change:

Postmodernism suggests that the limits of modernism have been reached, at least in the West, and that the pursuit of unshakable foundations for analytic truth is fruitless. In addition, it appears to many that the promise of modernity to achieve the emancipation of humanity from poverty and prejudice is no longer feasible, and that politics of revolution, forms of knowledge, and subjective experiences have less liberating potential than once was thought (Brown 23).

Despite the critical strides gained by social movements throughout United States history, postmodern theoretical developments had abandoned instrumental political agency as a viable strategy for social change.

An inevitable implication of the alleged erosion of political agency in late industrial capitalism is that theorists began hailing cultural texts as “the” moment of political resistance while isolating political agency to text production (if you have resources) and text consumption (if you don’t). According to popular cultural theorist John Fiske, texts provide “pleasure in the process of making meanings” (1987: 239). Resistance is the act of consuming critical cultural texts as opposed to political resistance in the public sphere. As a result, the instrumental goals of social change—objectives that seek to redistribute resources to the exploited and oppressed through agitational politics—only vaguely concerned critical and cultural theorists of the last two decades.

The theoretical trends that characterize agency as a discursive enterprise and an act of performative invention to social change have also influenced the study of rhetoric. In his article “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Quebecois,” Maurice

Charland argued that there has been a significant bias towards conceptualizing rhetoric as persuasion as opposed to a constitutive conception of rhetoric influenced by Kenneth Burke's notion of identification. Therefore, Charland set up a dichotomy between theorizing the rhetorical process as persuasion (instrumental goals) or identification (constitutive goals). Charland's position on constitutive rhetoric centers the space of social change squarely in the arena of discourse. For Charland, rhetorical theory as persuasion doesn't account for "social identity, religious faith, sexuality, ideology [which] is beyond the realm of rational or even free choice, beyond the realm of persuasion" (211). He insists that rhetoric as persuasion for instrumental ends neglects the constitutive aspects of communication that precede persuasion, such as the negotiation of identity. Therefore, Charland argues that scholars should look for and appeal to an audience through their identity.

The major contribution of Charland's work is in the reformulation of the ontological assumptions of the subject in rhetorical theory. He argues that history and discourse form the ground of subjectivity and retheorizes agency through identity and the consumption of discourse. Characterizing constitutive rhetoric as embracing a form of agency Charland argues:

Constitutive rhetorics, as they identify, have power because they are oriented towards action. As Althusser and McGee both stress, ideology is material, existing not in the realm of ideas, but in that of material practices. Ideology is material because subjects enact their ideology and reconstitute their material world in its image. Constitutive rhetorics are ideological not merely because they provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to

experience, but because they insert “narratized” subjects-as-agents into the world.”(223)

Much like the debate over the politics of the text in the process of social change that ensued in Cultural Studies, constitutive rhetoric maintains that agency comes from consuming texts, which have influence over individual behavior. This reformulation of the subject not only erases a conception of agency as a collective struggle against hegemonic blocs—while locating the emancipatory moment in identity—but also constrains subjects by theorizing their inability to escape the structures of discourse with rationale thought.

Locating the struggle for hegemony within the domain of identity has significant implications for how scholars analyze, theorize and prescribe social change. The postmodern influence on the academy, which re-theorizes the politics of social change, is important to Celeste Condit's theoretical development of hegemony. Condit's theory shifts the traditional commitments of hegemony to a focus on political consensus, a term she names concordance. According to Condit, power relations are no longer unidirectional, therefore, ruling ideologies must incorporate a broad range of interests that leads to "active assent from allies and passive from others" (Concordance 209). As a result, Condit's work repositions Gramsci's theory of hegemony to accommodate a “new and complex historical condition” where material inequality is no longer a significant factor in the process of social change. She argues, "culture, language and identity are as significant and as real as economies" (Rejoinder 1999). Much like Charland, Cultural Studies scholars and those developing theories around new social movements, Condit foregrounds identity and other discursive strategies as the primary location of social

change but also strangely miscalculates how rhetorical theorists assess the process of hegemony in political struggles.

Condit's critiques of concordance centered on how discursive formations are negotiated in the public arena. First, the critic must understand the ways in which social organizations arrive at a concordance. Condit argues, methodologically, the residue of concordance is evident in the text. Therefore, hegemony or the negotiation of concordance can be evaluated by identifying the different categories of discourse in texts and recontextualizing them (Concordance 212). In addition, the critic should identify the accommodations made and missed while negotiating concordance. An assumption of concordance is that "text[s] usually tell[s] us what parties are involved, and what they have at stake" (221). Condit's theory of concordance is part of larger body of literature that emphasizes political struggle as primarily a discursive encounter in theory, method and practice.

A limitation of Condit's theory is that the methodological approach and theoretical assumptions to understanding concordance are highly uncritical of the negotiation of power relations in the public sphere. Tallying the themes of discourse to ensure multi-vocality does not paint a complete picture of political negotiation nor does it deal with economic conditions that constrain choice. Although Condit's approach to consensus identifies the types of poly-vocal discourse present in a text, she does not take into account the conditions of hegemony that do not begin and end with the text.

Perhaps no other critic has challenged the primarily discursive approach the study of power and social change more than Dana L. Cloud. In her article "The Materiality of Discourse: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," she makes a poignant statement about a

growing number of scholars who have embraced rhetoric as a tool of social justice. She challenges "the idea that discourse itself is influential in or even constitutive of social and material reality" (Cloud Materiality 141). The postmodern influence on the rhetorical domain has resulted in two versions of what Cloud calls "the materiality of discourse hypothesis": 1) that discourse should be considered material because it affects material interests in the world and 2) that discourse not only affects material reality but is reality. Cloud concludes that perspectives which adopt idealist or relativist assumptions about rhetoric overestimate the power discourse has to rectify material inequality and oppression:

The project of the critique of ideology, modernist as it may be, is the only critical stance that suggests discourse may justify oppression and exploitation, but texts do not themselves constitute the oppression. In other words, when one assumes either that historical agency lies with text (idealism) or that textuality is all there is (relativism), one risks leaving behind the project of critique. (Materiality 157)

Cloud argues that we must not over estimate the influence discourse has to control, create and rectify the struggles for power in the public sphere. Therefore, the postmodern influence on scholarship, represented in the new social movements literature, cultural studies and rhetorical theory account for two flaws in theory building: 1) it emphasizes symbolic change at the expense of material change; and 2) it tends to consider social change absent any economic and class influence.

Building a theory of social change that minimizes and sometimes all together ignores important economic structures in the public sphere, risks masking the exploitation of marginalized communities by placing agency at their discursive fingertips. This

masking of domination in the name of liberation is particularly conceivable when theorists conflate the power of economic and cultural injustice. One may find cultural liberation but that moment does not necessarily rectify or erase economic exploitation, especially when the structures of production are a significant constraint in the contemporary public sphere. Condit's misguided assumptions give rise to a tainted construction of political negotiation that is not critical of hegemony, oppression and/or exploitation.

A materialist approach to text would acknowledge the reality of a society divided by class as critical to understanding social change. Although Gramsci may have been vague about the various facets of hegemony, he was clear about the role of material interests in the process of social change. Economic interests have significant consequences for the process of social change and mediating the struggle for hegemony in the public sphere: "[M]aterial inequality is on the rise in most of the world's countries—in the United States and in China, in Sweden and in India, in Russia and in Brazil. It is also increasing global, most dramatically across the line that divides North from South" (Fraser, 11). Although there may be a perception of economic stability and security in the United States, however, there is a significant economic concern for most Americans:

In the richest societies in the world, including the United States, the working class still experiences oppression. Oppression takes many forms: regressive taxation policies; inferior schools; substandard or inaccessible medical care; prevailing ideologies that teach workers that they are less intelligent or less capable than the better-educated middle and upper classes; even the siting of toxic waste dumps,

never installed anywhere but in working class areas [. . .] [O]ppression is endemic to capitalism (Smith 40).

Therefore, theorists invested in the process of social change must consider important and systematic economic interests when developing rhetorical theory.

Applying the theoretical conceptions of social change with the practical implications of political struggle, Fraser argues that instead of fighting oppression through systematic critique and instrumental change, agitators for social change now gravitate towards mobilizing around recognition concerns:

The "struggle for recognition" is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late 20th century. Demands for "recognition of difference" fuel struggles of groups mobilized under the banner of nationality, ethnicity, "race," gender, and sexuality. In these, "post socialist" conflicts; group identity supplants class interests as the chief medium of political mobilization. Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socio-economic redistribution as the remedy for injustices and the goal of political struggle. (11)

As a result, recent scholarship in rhetorical theory, cultural studies and social movements studies have advocate a description of social change that shifted from political agitation for the purpose of material redistribution into recognition of cultural texts as sites of resistance and self-actualization. However, Fraser reminds theorists to identify two types of injustice: 1) socio-economic which is a result of the political economic structure, and 2) cultural or symbolic injustice that is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication (14). Given that social change is much more

complicated than discursive struggles for recognition and the consumption of rhetorical texts as a site of resistance, how do counter-hegemonic texts function in the public sphere? It's not that identity and discursive political struggles are meaningless. However, how do cultural and material struggles create social change in the public sphere through cultural texts such as documentary film?

In their book The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control, Bowers, Ochs and Jensen identified four strategies of social movement agitators: 1) petition which involves discourse that approaches the establishment and proposes change occur, 2) promulgation which includes the all of the tactics designed to win social support for the agitators position, 3) solidification which is rhetoric primarily used to unite followers and 4) polarization which involves tactics designed to move individuals into agitational ranks by forcing a conscious choice between agitation and control (20-36).

Within the activist video movement, consciousness raising through representational video texts functioned to promulgate, to solidify and that's pretty much it. However, for some activists and theorists, consciousness-raising is an essential strategy of social change:

[T]he process is transformative as well as perceptive, since thought and thing are inextricable and reciprocally constitutive...just as the state as coercion and the state as legitimating ideology are indistinguishable, and for the same reasons. The pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice. (MacKinnon 84)

The important project of consciousness raising needs to be situated in the larger instrumental project of social change. The commitment to a separatist media community as a form of consciousness raising, which was not connected to any specific social

movement, only marginally aided the process of social change because documentaries cannot petition; people do. In addition, polarization requires that movements must be committed to specific issues in order to force conscious political choices. The abandonment of an instrumental political program meant that there was no collective organization to advocate for the social change punctuated in a given documentary, once the film or tape reached a wide audience. Without that instrumental body, how can a movement sustain the stage of petition and grow? These questions evoke themes from the scholarship developing in the area of public sphere theory, especially in regard to the development of new media technology such as the internet and inexpensive digital video production.

Public Sphere Theory

The study of the public sphere is a critical component of understanding democratic order. Public sphere theory can be drawn upon as a means of theorizing the complex mediation between documentary film, ideology and the broader social domain. Although there is a considerable academic debate over the boundaries and functions of the public sphere, the developments in understanding counter-publics is the most applicable to the project of social change. While some scholars have defined counter-publics as primarily constitutive entities evoked by the act of being addressed (Warner 56-63), I will argue that counter-publics are stratified societies that emerge in response to exclusion. Members of a subordinate social group strive to circulate vernacular discourse in order to gain support for identities, interests and needs (Fraser 122-124). These communities are also known in theoretical literature as social movements. Ansen and Brouwer note that the most recent work suggests that the public sphere should be thought

of as a “multiplicity of dialectically related public spheres rather than a single encompassing arena of discourse” (6). Hence, the historically contextualized study of social movements has the potential to ground public sphere theory and add to the rich conceptual history. However, the foundation of public sphere theory can be traced back to the works of Jurgen Habermas.

In his book, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Jurgen Habermas argues that there has been a shift from a culture debating to a culture-consuming public. Reading the development of the literary public sphere through letters, Habermas concludes, “The public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption (160).” This process began with the fragmentation of the private sphere into two arenas.

According to Habermas, when the conception of property-ownership was naturalized, a separation occurred within the private realm. One area of the private realm was concerned with “affairs that private people pursued individually each in the interests of the reproduction of his own life (160).” While one area of the private realm was concerned with tasks and activities that keep life moving, the other area of the private sphere involved the “interaction that united private people into a public (160).” Habermas then compares the consumption of pleasure and desire through the media is akin to the area of the private sphere that is consumed with the interests that aid in the reproduction of ones own life.

It is these two activities, the affairs of reproducing one’s own life and the consumption of aesthetically driven media texts, according to Habermas, have no transformative potential for the public sphere. He even goes as far as to claim that the

consumption of the mass media does not have the ability to transform into public communication between private people. Instead, he theorizes, public communication between private people continues to be hollowed out by the mass media and its aesthetic elements: “[A] pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity (162)” The consumption of mass media, in his estimation, facilitated the absence of literary and political debate and gave way to more or less noncommittal group activities that resulted with informal sociability with no specific institutional power. Because these leisure activities required no further discussion and lacked the interconnectedness of institutional affiliation, no public is formed around such group activities (163). For Habermas, participation in the public sphere demanded that private people become active in engaging in rational-critical discourse.

In his book, “Publics and Counter-Publics,” Michael Warner argues that the idea of a “public” is a cultural form, a kind of fiction. Commenting on Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, Warner argues,

[T]he public-sphere environment Habermas describes can be seen as the context of modern social movements, including identity politics. Social movements take shape in civil society, often with an agenda of demands vis-à-vis the state. They seek to change policy by appealing to public opinion. They arise from contexts of critical discussion, many of them print-mediated. The question for debate, then, is to what extent the environment for critical social movements is becoming more undemocratic, ‘refeudalized,’ or colonized by changing relations among the state, mass media, and the market. (50)

This project will ground the theories of publics and counter-publics in the historical context of activist documentary. Embracing Warner's observation and given the changing relations among the state, mass media and the market, what are the potential political moments of social change for counter-publics?

With technological advancements such as television and the internet, viewers have the potential to connect and engage in critical rational debate and community building around problems communicated rhetorically in documentary films. The fragmentation expressed by Habermas concerning the consumption of mass media is unfounded in a world that is no longer divided by geography but connected in cyberspace. The lack of institutional power to create instrumental change is alleviated by the ability of counter-publics to appropriate the tools of public relations to generate support outside the conception of the state such as media publicity and financial support to sustain the social change process. One could read this new historical moment as one of publics becoming "constituted through mere attention" (Warner 87-89) or as a moment to be critical about what actions and level of participation has the potential to create instrumental social change.

Warner's contribution is a new conception of publics and counter-publics for a new contemporary historical epoch. Unlike the traditional understanding of social movements politics as instrumental, action-oriented entities, Warner proposes that publics are not instrumental but a constitutive grouping: "To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology" (10).

Warner's position lowers the entrance requirements for what counts as participating in a public from private persons exercising rational-critical discourse into simply becoming a participant in a public by sheer attention or identity (87-89). This reformulation has liberating and constraining implications for social change.

Given the complex interplay between documentary film viewership and the potential connections between audience members on the internet and other mass media, distribution plays an interesting role in social change. Although the market for documentary film fluctuates and can be influenced by competing corporate interests, when assessing the complexities of activist documentary film, the expanse of distribution is a significant concern. What good is a rhetorical argument against social injustice (documentary film) if the viewership (audience) is small and insular (festival circuit audience or a sparsely used parallel broadcast network)? Inherent of the assumption of activist documentary film is that social critique must reach an audience. To engage the process of social change, activist documentary film must play out in a larger public sphere (Palczewski 166). Warner's idea that publics are partially constructed through circulation of text helps explain how documentary films could achieve a civic function. However, circulation of text is only one part of the process of social change that involves several other stages, collective organization and instrumental action.

Warner's inclination to lower the entrance requirements for participation in a public to the act of sheer attention is not without foundation. For the need to command sheer attention speaks to an essential stage of social change, promulgation. At some point, social movement publics must engage in rhetorical strategies that gain the "attention" of potential supporters outside the movement. However, this does not

necessarily equate to participation, nor should it. The history of social movements is a story of living—breathing bodies that are moving, acting, debating, petitioning, protesting and creating in the public sphere. The history of social change is not a history of passive viewership, nor should the potential for human agency be characterized in that manner. By lowering the entrance requirements for what counts as participation in a public, Warner problematizes the necessary dialectic between public and counter-public. In the broader communicative process of social change, sheer attention cannot count as adequate civic participation in a counter-public sphere, if instrumental social change is a priority. But more specifically, Warner seems to deny publics the agency to create collective opinion and to act instrumentally: "There is no moment at which the conversation stops and a decision ensues, outside of elections, and those are given by legal frameworks, not publics" (p.97). Counter-publics need to be recognized as sites to develop critical rational opposition in practice and in theory (Felski 1989; Fraser 1992). Therefore, this project will use the study of social movements and documentary film to ground public sphere theory and Warner's contribution.

Conclusion

Documentary film has the potential to aid—and in moments create—instrumental social change. However, there are many lessons to be learned from the history of documentary film. Specifically, what are the political moments for cultural texts? How do they function in a larger political program for social change? Cultural texts, alone, cannot evoke all the stages of social change. In the case of documentary film, the texts have the potential to contribute to the process of solidification and promulgation. However,

documentary film is only one strategy used to solidify or promulgate a movement in the process of social change—a process that involves many other stages.

However, the ability for documentary film to reach significant audiences through such a powerful medium makes the genre a natural and necessary tool for activism, one that can no longer be overlooked in the study of rhetoric and social change. In practice, the affordability and access to new video technology allows counter-publics to maximize promulgation and solidification approaches in the public sphere, with little difficulty and expense.

Identity is a questionable locus of social change. Charland's proposal that the rhetorical moment should be wrapped up in identity has significant consequences for social change. In theoretical discussion and in practice, identity tends to 1) mask economic struggles critical to social change and 2) limits agency to discursive consumption. In addition, foregrounding discursive strategies of social change which neglect or minimize economic interests privileges a population of subjects who are materially sustained enough to find economic exploitation a minimal concern.

Hegemony is discursive as well as material. As a critic, it is not enough to locate interests in text by counting rhetorical themes as Condit suggests. Cultural recognition may appear in text but material exploitation or redistribution does not. Therefore, an extra-discursive check on discourse is a critical component of assessing hegemonic struggle. Without an extra-discursive check, conception of concordance is highly uncritical of hegemony and risks masking domination by settling for counting discourse as social change.

Counter-publics must resist the impulse to become mired in developing community. Counter-publics must be instrumental and act within a dialectical relationship with other publics. Activist documentary film must recognize that there is a project for social change outside the film screening. The constitution of the audience through documentary film is only one strategy, in one part of the project of social change.

The history of documentary film and social change is still left to be written. Given the commitment to civil engagement inherent in the theoretical assumptions of rhetorical studies and documentary film studies, each field has a great deal to learn from one another. In practice, the theoretical studies of activist documentary film and public sphere theory may yield important practical information about how activist documentary films and video may function more effectively in the process of social change. In doing so, the study of documentary film and social change has a significant potential to ground some of the most contentious debates in critical theory.

DISSERTATION CHAPTER OUTLINE

HISTORY

Chapter One: Introduction to Documentary Film and Social Change

For well over a century, non-fiction film has figured prominently in the public sphere as a powerful means of persuasion. This project will explore the intersection of cultural texts and social change by investigating the history of contemporary activist documentary film. Using all the available means of persuasion and coercion at their disposal, social movements have collectively developed a diverse set of tactics and strategies to prompt social change, documentary films being one of the most understudied texts.

Documentary films that reflect the interests of social movements are important but to what end and in what rhetorical situations are these strategies most effective for social change? This study will not call into question the importance of cultural texts like documentary film but rather how constitutive cultural strategies constrain or aid the instrumental goals of contemporary social movements. This project will explore the commitments of early activist media, theories of social change, the second wave of activist media and finally, the function of contemporary activist documentary.

There is much left to be studied about the relationship of activist cultural texts and social change. The manner in which activist documentary film is conceptualized in theoretical literature or in film reviews, primarily qualifies the term “activist” with the intentions of the film maker and his or her ideological commitments outside of filmmaking. There is, however, another tendency to label documentary film as “activist” based on content. If the film mediates as political or moral controversy, the inclination is

to label it “activist.” However, such labels are fruitless if the film does not actually intervene in a larger public space to create active political agents that will extend and execute the political work initiated by a documentary film. It is not enough for documentary film to “be” activist; it must help in creating the space for activism and invested in producing material and cultural change. This chapter will explore the rhetorical and theoretical questions my dissertation as well as provide an introduction to the project.

Chapter Two: The First Wave of Activist Documentary Film.

In the early part of the 1930s, economic collapse had festered and produced significant political tension and strife. At this precise moment, documentary film technology had just acquired sound and celebrated the last moments of silent film. For the first time, spoken word could be added to image. Coincidentally, technological innovation in a historical moment of social crisis, called documentary film into the arena of social change. This chapter will explore the rhetorical challenges and limitations of early activist filmmaking in the work of John Grierson and in the first documentary film collectives such as the Workers Film and Photo League. Grierson believed that the popular media could acquire leverage over ideas and actions once influenced by church and school. While The Workers Film and Photo League was a movement that managed to bring workers consciousness to the public sphere through documentary film texts and organized collectives around these objectives. Consequently, these early films are part of a larger body of cultural discourse that has accompanied the efforts to accomplish grassroots social change in popular culture during the 1930s. This project addresses

theoretical questions concerning documentary studies, social movements studies and rhetorical theory.

Chapter Three: The Second Wave of Activist Documentary and the Birth of Street Tapes.

This chapter will investigate the second wave of activist media born out of the late 1960s and precipitated by the development of low-format, portable video technology. Given the impulse of direct cinema to foreground vernacular voices and the commitment of cinema verite practitioners to intervene in the project of political dissent, documentary film and social change found new feet. In the early 1960s heightened political crisis and the development of low-cost video technology created the breeding ground for a new population of filmmakers. This time, the people from the margins were making their own film and activists were creating their own media. It was the birth of the activist documentary film and video movement. Troubled by the political and social unrest of the 1960s, the guerrilla television movement focused on a utopian program to change the structure of information in America by creating a distinct parallel broadcast system. Political contestation was solved “not by directly assaulting the system—as in a political revolution—but by extending the unifying properties of electronic media to everyone” (Boyle 31). This project addresses complex theoretical questions concerning public sphere theory, audience reception studies, rhetorical theory and social movements studies.

THE THIRD WAVE: CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY FILM AND VIDEO

Chapter Four: Street Tapes and the Contemporary Internet Activist Video

Movement

The internet is a medium most closely associated with e-mail and e-commerce. As a result, the development of web-based communication has slowly urbanized into a new breeding ground for low cost advertising and marketing. However, a new movement, with democratic motives and not all concerned with profit margins, is utilizing the potential of internet communication for slightly different ends. With the growth of the globalization movement, the technological advancements in video production, and the development of the internet, street reporting re-emerged in the late 1990s. Contemporary activist internet journalism developed roots in 1999 during the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. The meeting of the WTO spawned one of the largest and most cohesively organized instances of social protests in recent decades. This chapter will focus on the use of documentary video produced by the Independent Media Center as a strategy of solidification and promulgation in the process of social change. This project addresses theoretical questions concerning public sphere theory, radical democracy, computer mediated communication, rhetorical studies and theories of social change.

Chapter Five: Commercial Documentary Film and Social Change

There appears to be a divide between theorists who argue that meaningful political discussion is hollowed out by the mass media and the practices of everyday citizens who use the media and internet to engage the political process. Therefore, what is the function of mass media texts like commercial documentary film, in the process of social change? Can the process of social change be sustained through anesthetized

cultural texts? This chapter will explore the intersection between mass mediated aesthetics, the public sphere and social change through contemporary documentary film. This chapter will analyze two HBO documentaries, Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hill and Paradise Lost Revelations. Both films chronicle a murder trial in Arkansas in which three young men are convicted of killing three adolescent boys. The first film, Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hill, documents the trial of the three young men while the second film reflects on the impact of the first documentary politically, socially and legally. I will argue that mediated, politically driven and aesthetically dressed rhetorical texts not only have the potential to be acts of political oratory but under the correct conditions can transform into a public communication between private people that has the potential for collective social change. This project addresses complex theoretical questions concerning aesthetic theory, cultural studies, and theories of social change.

Chapter Six: Documentary Filmmaker as Activist: A Case Study in Michael Moore

After winning an Academy Award for best documentary, Michael Moore ignited a firestorm of controversy by denouncing President Bush and the war on Iraq to a 33 million-person television audience. Moore, responsible for making one of the most commercially successful political documentaries of all time, recognizes that the Oscars are not normally a place for political commentary (United Press International, March 28, 2003). After receiving a robust round of boos and cheers, Moore defended his actions by stating, “[I]f I had won the Oscar for a movie about birds or insects, I’d say something about them. But I made a movie about violence—and global violence—so I felt I had to say something about that. I just hope I generated a discussion about Mr. Bush and the

war. (Salt Lake Tribune, March 29, 2003)” This chapter will analyze the rhetoric of Michael Moore as a filmmaker/activist by exploring his films, books, and press interviews.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Implications

Time Table for Completing the Dissertation Project

<u>Task</u>	<u>Deadline</u>	
Gathering of Principal Data	completed	
Research on Subject	completed	
Research on Method	completed	
Writing Chapter Drafts:	First Draft IN	Revisions IN
Chapter One	May 24th	June 1st
Chapter Two	March 22nd	April 19th
Chapter Three	April 12th	May 17th
Chapter Four	March 1st	March 29th
Chapter Five	February 16th	March 8th
Chapter Six	May 10th	June 7th
Chapter Seven	June 14th	June 28th
Completing Final Draft	July 5th	
Oral Defense	July 26th	

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