

4:00 pm Wednesday 7 June 2006

Occlusion of the Ocular: Video Documentations and Human Rights Discourse

Keith Beattie

America's 'unfunniest' home video- George Holliday's videotape of the beating of Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles Police Department- seemed to demonstrate the potential role of video technology in the documentation of the abuse of civil liberties and human rights. The rock musician Peter Gabriel has acknowledged that it was the Holliday video which inspired him in 1992 to co-establish Witness, a New York-based nongovernmental organisation which provides video cameras to groups for the purposes of recording legal evidence of human rights violations. Interestingly, Gabriel's understanding of the Holliday footage, as expressed within his belief that it revealed an abuse of King's rights (a position based on the commonsense notion that seeing is believing), was contested in the Court's not guilty verdict against the Los Angeles Police officers involved in the incident. Similarly, the video documentations produced under the auspices of Witness must contend with the formal properties of the nonfiction image, in ways which satisfy the demands and rules of varying legal systems.

In a related way, Witness video documentations- produced and received within the juridical context of human rights- represent a challenge to contemporary variants of a documentary theory grounded in a poststructuralist scepticism of evidentiary truth. A 'return of the real' in recent documentary theory has not, however, defused the potential of video documentations produced as legal evidence to disrupt basic theoretical interpretations of sociohistorical experience.

This presentation seeks, on the one hand, to register the impact of human rights documentaries on documentary theory, as a way of informing that theory, and on the other hand brings documentary theory and practice so informed to bear on the ways in which visual representations of rights can function as legal evidence. To this end, video documentations produced under the umbrella of Witness are examined together with the modes and techniques of the film *Two Laws* (Cavadini and Strachan, 1981), which addresses the issue of land rights in Australia.

Dr. Keith Beattie lectures at Deakin's Burwood campus. His publications include the books *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York University Press, 1998 and 2000), *Documentary Screens* published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2004, *Documentary Display* (forthcoming), and *24 Frames: Australian and New Zealand Cinema* (forthcoming). Keith is currently writing *The Truth of the Matter: Documentary and Human Rights* for Palgrave Macmillan. Prior to joining the staff of Deakin University, Keith taught at Massey University in New Zealand, and at the University of Queensland. Between 1997 and 2000 he edited the *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, published by the Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association.

**There is no entry charge and everyone is welcome.
Drinks and nibbles will be provided.**

The Blue Room , Building B, Room 2.. 20, Burwood Campus