Claremont Colleges
Scholarship @ Claremont

Scripps Senior Theses | Scripps Student Scholarship

2010

Apparent Fate, 2010: Dismantling the Notion of Photographic Truth

Kelsey M. MacDonald
Scripps College

Recommended Citation
MacDonald, Kelsey M., "Apparent Fate, 2010: Dismantling the Notion of Photographic Truth" (2010). *Scripps Senior Theses.* Paper 18.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/18

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

APPARENT FATE, 2010:
DISMANTLING THE NOTION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH

BY

KELSEY M. MACDONALD

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR SUSAN RANKAITIS
and PROFESSOR NANCY MACKO
PROFESSOR KEN GONZALES-DAY

MAY 4, 2010

When creating a current work, artists cannot ignore the images that have preceded theirs. The history of a medium and the related history of subject matter is vital to the meaning of a new art work. Each sign and symbol has a connotation out of the artists' control. The developed meaning of a symbol is inseparable for the viewer regardless of the acknowledgment of that meaning by the artist. To work with imagery and not address it's historical context is to perpetuate it's meaning. The only way to not state what has already been stated is to critically engage with the preexisting meaning of the imagery. An artist can combine symbols to create dual meanings or juxtapositions of meaning, or present the imagery in a way that complicates what it already signifies. "Apparent Fate," my combined negative, photographic mural, uses imagery from Yosemite National Park to comment on photography's function or purpose in history and in the current economic, political, environmental, and social conditions in California and society's current stance on Manifest Destiny. How have the ideas of innate rights over people and places changed over time in American culture?

Photography has an interesting history as it relates to fine art. The camera was introduced to the European world, as early as the 1830's, as a scientific tool. It was considered a device that recorded light with out any subjective intervention from humans. Objectivity and removing the human element from science was a main goal of the time. Scientist strove to understand an independent element detached from interpretation or representation. Subjectivity was viewed as faulty and removable. Photography was used as a process of documenting a place or people to allow those, who had the privilege of a camera, to understand and catalogue the rest of the world. The camera was viewed as, not an extension of the photographer, but rather a completely separate recording tool that was

unaffected and unchanged by the photographer. Leading into the nineteenth century photography began to be considered an art form, however, it was appreciated as a medium that could portray the visual truth. Photography was understood as an objective form of art unlike any other art forms of the 1800s. "A photograph of the battlefield at Gettysburg was accepted, prima facie, as a bona fide representation of the scene one would have beheld had one stood in the same pace that the Civil War photographer stood."[1] This description of a war photograph highlights that the camera was looked at as a window into which anyone could look and see an unbiased view of the scene taken by the photographer. Who the photographer was, was rarely in question or relevant when discussing photographs. At this point in history, cameras were not common commodities. This lack of access hindered the realization that the photographer had everything to do with the photograph and that the camera was not merely a window, but a lens and a viewfinder operated by a photographer. However, the myth of photographic truth was bound to crumble. If the viewer does find the photograph to be an accurate depiction of a subject or scene, then the viewer lives within the same moral code as the photographer. The cycle of the photographer and the viewer sharing visual codes needed to be broken before the recognition that a photograph was not objective. The realization that a photographer could alter an image came about in the beginning of the 1900s. However, a distinction was made between fine art and documentary photography, which protected the notion of visual truth. Even into the 1930s, documentary photographs such as those taken by the FSA photographers were still viewed as an accurate depiction of the dust bowl and economic conditions of the Great Depression. To some extent, that notion of "Truth" still

---

[1] Jean Robertson, Craig McDaniel, Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 16.

lingers in popular thought around those iconic FSA photographs of "Migrant Mother[i]" and others. The notion that a camera and therefore a photograph are always affected by the photographer, who touches them, has still not come to full fruition in current popular culture. Steve McCurry, a noted documentary photographer of our day and photographer of *The Afghan girl* expresses in his artist statement, "…in the finest documentary tradition, (McCurry) captures the essence of human struggle and joy."[2] The "essence of human struggle and joy" is held as an assumed constant or given in this statement. There is not acknowledgment of McCurry's Western upbringing and consequently his extreme cultural and racial separation from his middle-eastern female subject. The essence that McCurry speaks of cannot and never will be the same for every spectator.

Many artists work against this myth of photographic truth by actively and explicitly constructing images to make the viewer aware of the subjective nature of the photographic image. Jerry Uelsmann is a film photographer whose work came to prominence in the 1960s. He ranked one of the top ten photographers collected in American by a 1981 poll in American Photographer. His work is unique and awe-inspiring through his flawless darkroom technique of combining negatives to create one seam-less, seemingly realistic image. His ability to create an image through all analog tools that appears untouched but is clearly very altered and surreal shatters the viewers' notion of truth in a photographic image. That jaw-dropping reaction that Uelsmann's work has on his viewers creates distrust between spectator and image. A distrust that is necessary for a spectator to critically analyze and engage with a piece of art no matter how similar it looks to the viewer's perception of the world around them. By combining

[2] http://www.stevemccurry.com/main.php

images to create visual representations of things that do not physically exist in this world, Uelsmann surpasses the chance that any of his spectators could live within the same visual code as he and therefore receive his images as natural or realistic. His work speaks to the notion that every image is subjective and implies that each person's notion of reality is different and therefore subjective.

Joel-Peter Witkin also plays with the popular notion of "Truth" in photography by confusing his viewers' necessary connection between the 3-D object/subject that is being photographed and the 2-D image that results in a photograph.[ii] By photographing corpses, Witkin blurs the line between subject and object in his images and propels his viewers into the abject; a state in which they cannot differentiate between what is "real" and what is not. The abject represents the reaction of horror humans have when approaching the potential for a break down in meaning caused by the existence of something outside the symbolic order. The symbolic order, first delineated by Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, is the entrance into language when humans start defining the world around them in terms of binaries and therefore recognized "the self" as a separate entity than "the other." Relations such as "I" and "other,"/ "mother" and "father,"/ "white" and "black,"/ "subject" and object" start to form and naturalize. The symbolic order allows subjects to coordinate his or her objects of desire. Humans have an abject reaction of disgust or discomfort when there is a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of division between subject and object or self and other. The most well known example of this is the reaction humans have towards the corpse, which traumatically reminds us of our own materiality. "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from

another body in order to be."[3] . "A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell or sweat, or decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being."[4] The corpse especially exemplifies Kristeva's concept since it literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity and for our entrance into the symbolic order. What we are confronted with when we experience the trauma of seeing a human corpse is our own eventual death made tangibly real. The incomplete body evokes the same realization of materiality of the body. Once a body part is severed from our body, does that mean that we have to recognize it as the other? This loss of meaning brings us back to a pre-lingual state in which we could not differentiate between "me" and "(m)*other*." This confusion or breakdown in meaning by the loss of distinction between self and other is what makes the fragmented body an abject one. Witkin also invokes the abject by altering his images so a seemingly female body has male genitalia. In one of his most famous photographs, Witkin restages the Botechilli's "Birth of Venus," where Venus is a transsexual.[iii] This commentary on an iconic piece of fine art forces the viewer to critically engage with all art as a medium that is used, quite effectively, in constructing society's notions of sexuality, womanhood, and masculinity. The abject refers to what Kristeva calls a "primal repression." This comes before we ascertain our relation to our objects of desire

---

[3] Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1892. p. 10
[4] Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1892. p. 3

and of representation, for example a photograph. On the level of individual psychosexual development, the abject marks the moment when we separated ourselves from the mother, when we began to recognize a boundary between "me" and other, or "me" and "(m)*other*." In this sense, the abject is, "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."[5] In the Powers of Horror, Kristeva correlates the abject with the eruption of the Real, which is the actual materiality of things, into our lives. In particular, she corresponds such a response with our rejection of death's insistent materiality or objectification. Our reaction to such abject material evokes a response that is pre-lingual; with out the notions of binaries that language established. Therefore she deliberately divides the knowledge of death and the meaning of death from the horrifying experience of being actually confronted with the sort of materiality that traumatically shows you your own death. The fragmentation of a body, or the incomplete body shows us that the body is merely a material, able to be severed and dismembered and disfigured. Witkin's work makes his spectators realize that no art is neutral and that even if the image is not obviously constructed or manipulated the concepts and notions in all art is constructed by man and therefore subjective and *subject* to criticism and interpretation. By referencing a piece of fine European art, that is accepted as natural by popular Western culture, Witkin is begging the question, "What notions are naturalized and how?" The concepts that society finds comfortable or common are only interpreted as such because we have been lulled, through repetition, into believing that those constructs are given or natural. Our symbolic or visual code is formed by the images that constantly

[5] Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1892. p. 4

surround us and those images are dependent on location, time, race, economic status, and gender.

David Hockney, who also worked through the 1960's and 70's, used a more direct and explicit approach to the constructed image by collaging multiple images of the same scene, but from different perspectives, into a disjointed image that reads as a single setting.[iv] Due to the fact that Hockney plays with perspective, it enlightens the viewer to the infinite number of ways a photographer has the ability to capture a place or subject. In this situation, the spectator is forced to realize that the photographer and the camera are selective and discerning tools used to form a subjective reality or (RE)presentation of a place or person. Some critics, using the intentionalist approach, have stated that Hockney is not breaking down the objectivity of photography by using multiple perspectives, but rather is upholding it by portraying that a photograph has the ability to represent different perspectives and therefore can potentially approach objectivity. This argument is ultimately individually proven or dis-proven by the effect Hockney's images have on each spectator. However, Hockney's distortion of perspective, from using a wide-angle lens, and lack of visual fluidity tends not to translate to "objective reality" or have the window-effect.

The Starn twins, Mike and Doug, worked in a more contemporary time than Uelsmann, Witkin, and Hockney, producing most of their works in the 1980's. The Starn twins like Witkin, worked against the naturalization of icons, specifically with the depiction of religious icons in their 1986 piece, "Triple Christ." [v] By constructing a contemporary depiction of Jesus through the medium of photography, the twins highlight the subjectivity in creating an iconic image that is internationally recognized. The work

questions the human subject or group of humans who decided to depict Jesus in a certain way. The subject of "Triple Christ" was a dynamic point of discussion and critique in the public realm. "Who is allowed to physically represent Jesus?" was a controversial question for many spectators. Also, by being known in the public realm as the Starn Twins instead of two separate artists, their work brings into question the artistic ownership of a piece. Who took the photograph? Who developed the negatives? Who printed the images? Who pieced them together? What step does an artist have to complete for it to be his/her piece? These questions displace and devalue the intentionalist approach to art, an approach most art critics tend to take when analyzing art.[6] The intentionalist approach to analysis is a method, which holds what the artist was trying to do of greatest importance, rather than what work the art does in the spectators' opinions. The intentionalist approach begins to be discredited when the spectator realizes that even if there is an artists' statement, the artist's opinion can change over time, or in the case of Mike and Doug Starn, can be different between the two artists. It highlights the greater importance, of not trying to find out what the artist was intending to do or say through his/her work, but what social and political work the piece does in the time and space it is presented and the viewer's past experiences and knowledge that they are bringing to the piece of artwork. Discarding the intentionalist approach, or at lest realizing its shortcomings, also brings into question the museum or gallery as a space. How and where the spectator views the work becomes of much greater importance. The choice of the

[6] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) 142-48.

artist to have the art viewed in a gallery now has a connotation. The gallery as a space becomes subjective and meaningful.

Creating and claiming conceptual and physical space in art creates a platform to discuss the explicit and implicit politics of space. A place can be significant as the subject of art or the space it physically inhabits. “Cultures transform places, imbuing them with memories, histories, and symbolic significance; they also change them physically. The meaning of a place may be charged by events that transpire there or a place may be overlaid with multiple histories.” [7] Many artists work to bring to light the political, social, cultural, philosophical, poetic, and psychological implications of place. Through claiming spaces, artists can represent alternative histories to the dominant master narrative. Control and ownership of space is often a point of controversy. Art has the ability to raise questions about the dichotomies of public vs. private, nature vs. culture, land vs. property, and Diaspora vs. imperialism. “A forced dislocation is an intense experience with both political and psychological effects. Art about displacement may focus on the journey itself, the condition of being in transit between places with different languages, customs, material culture, and ideas. Artists might explore the meaning and location of borders, boundaries, and zones of transition.”[8] The notion of a group of people belonging to a land starts an inquiry on national identity and a peoples’ relationship to the land or space they inhabit. All histories of a given land are important when analyzing art that deals with a space. The history that the artist is representing and the previous histories of a space can add dimensional information when interpreting a piece of art and give

---

[7] Jean Robertson, Craig McDaniel, Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 70.
[8] Jean Robertson, Craig McDaniel, Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 95.

the spectator perspective on not only the physical space but also the photographer.

Anselm Kiefer is a German artist that critiques national identity through claiming space in art. As a German law student in the 1960s Kiefer gained a formal understanding of how slanted the German government was in favor of Aryan people. The former law student turned to art in the early 1970's to develop German art that critiqued German national identity and those ideals that originally aided the Third Reich. In his art, Kiefer's often deals with places that have specific historical references to the Holocaust. This subject matter works to reclaim those sites as places of critical analysis for Germans as well as the international community. The artist's seemingly ambivalent use of loaded Nazi Germany, WWII taboo symbols separate him, a self-proclaimed German, from "his" country's identity. In his work, *Heroic Symbols*[vi], Kiefer humorously confronts these symbols. The disconnect between individual and culture speaks to the dynamic political opinions within a single national identity. Apathetically using those taboos not only undermines the power that such symbols held during Nazi Germany but also deconstructs the notion that the history of a place or people can be a singular one. Also, like the intention of an artist when making a work, the intention behind significance assigned to national symbols can drastically change over time. This change can completely alter how the symbol is received by viewers, or can leave the meaning unaffected depending of the reader. Kiefer also incorporates Semitic cultural signifiers into his pieces on German land to illuminate the inseparable political and social histories of the two cultural groups of people. This impenetrable connection enlightens its spectators on the formation of definition or identity through binaries. Black cannot exist with out white, culture cannot

exist without primitive, Aryan cannot exist without Semitic. The notion of binary opposition is important in understanding the formation of every social, political, and cultural identity. However, when stepping outside of semiotics and symbolism, the idea of the binary is insufficient in the comprehension of any one concept.

The intersecting and sometimes contradictory history of a place is also a point of interest for artist, Carrie Mae Weems. Propelled by the alternative histories of African-Americans in the United States, Weems' "Hampton Project"[vii] is a perfect example of how the process and methodology in recording history is as flawed and subjective as the person who documents it. The Hampton Institute, now Hampton University was a post-Civil War effort to give disfranchised ex-slaves and, later on, Native Americans, education and vocational training. This effort seemed, to the public, to be meant as a type of reparation for the Euro-white supremacy enforced through the institution of slavery before the Civil War. In the late 1800's, photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston was commissioned to produce a series of photographs that resulted in the "Hampton Album." These photographs depict the students at the Hampton Institute, as some critiqued, in suspended animation. The images seemed clearly staged and evoke a sense of unauthentic perfection. In the "Hampton Project", Weems juxtaposed Johnston's imagery with depictions of the Klu Klux Klan, 19th-century monuments and American Indians before the sartorial makeover required by schools. Weems uses the alternative photographic process of Van Dyke Brown to print some of these images of disphorous, transparent silk. This combination deconstructs the notion of redemption and reveals the institute as one, which perpetuated the ideals of slavery. It illuminates Johnston's photographs as mechanisms of cultural erasure or amnesia, not redemption. The use of

Van Dyke Brown visually references a particular historical moment. The application of this process on a transparent material, and layered in front of more photographs, forces the viewer to look through the images, or 'through history.' The layered images speak to the multiplicity of meaning of a photograph and also the lack of context one photograph can portray. Although the installation was supposed to exhibit at Hampton University, the institution revoked its invitation, stating that Weems had misunderstood the intentions of the Hampton Institute. Weems' installation evokes a complicated discussion on the ownership and re-appropriation of history. The desire to display the installation on the grounds of the ex-Hampton Institute serves as a reclaiming of that space by the critical African-American spectatorship. The refusal on behalf of the Hampton Institute brings up vital questions on the ownership of space. By re-appropriating Johnston's images, Weems critiques the notion that one image can relay a complicated history. It also raised awareness of the idea that a photograph is not only subjective because of the motives and limitations of the photographer but also the, often forgotten, motives of the person or institution funding that image. Similarly, the photographs taken by the FSA photographers during the 1930s and the images depicting, what is now, Yosemite National Park, circa 1840, were also funded by the U.S. government. The purpose that the government intended for these photographs has a certain effect on how the photograph ultimately represented the given space. The history of a place or people is never singular or fixed. Meaning is dynamic. Art, photography specifically, can create a platform to discuss that notion but it also struggles against the limitations of expressing that notion through a static, 2D image that has historically been used to perpetual the singular truth of the master narrative.

From the late 1960s to the late 1980s and 90s, the notion of site-specific art was emerging and changing. This movement changed the relationship of time and space in art and also brought into question the definition of a site. In 1989 Robert Barry stated, ”Site-specific works are determined by the topography of the site, whether it be urban or landscape or architectural enclosure. The works become part of the site and restructure both conceptually and perceptually the organization of the site.” Since the late 1960s, “site-specific” art has been through many alterations. While the earlier stages question the decontextualized space of the museum, highlighting the experiential and phenomenological nature of the works, more recent developments have attempted to revive the criticality of "site-specific.” In One Place After Another, Miwon Kwon provides us with an overview of these transformations, while working through the ambiguities and contradictions, or the "doubleness," inherent in "site-specificity." She also offers a theory of art and site that is applicable to the larger areas of our social, economic and political life. In order to encourage a complex rather than simple, linear reading of site-specificity, Kwon discourages the acceptance of each periodic development as a series of discrete essences. While each stage appears to follow a teleological path of currents and countercurrents, the site-specific developments and historical shifts are considered, in a manner similar to Foucault, as a series of disjunctions, highlighting the interweaving and complication of artistic, administrative or institutional forces. Kwon does however propose three paradigms to frame an otherwise fluid and unstable development: phenomenological/experiential, social/institutional and discursive. These archetypes can help spectators and artist in trying to interpret, or anticipate (in the case of the artist) the connotated meaning of a site.

Apparent Fate, 2009 /10, a synonym for Manifest Destiny, is an assembled image, comprised of twenty-two negatives and printed, on cotton, with the alternative process of Van Dyke Brown. The apparent constructedness of the image works to dismantle the notion of a singular truth, specifically the notion of photographic truth. Creating a visual representation of a burned forest in Yosemite National Park makes a platform to discuss the role of photographic images in the formation of Manifest Destiny and the western perception of land as property. Circa the 1840s, the U.S. Democratic Party commissioned artists to travel to the West coast to depict the land as lush and prosperous. Although publicly described as simply a means of letting the public "see" the West, as previously discussed, this objective "seeing" can not be attained. Like all images, these depictions were created with the purpose. These specifically were meant to influence the settlers on the East to move west and inhabit the land that the Democratic Party, so avidly, wanted to annex. Along with these images came a phrase coined by journalist, John L. O'Sullivan: Manifest Destiny. This school of thought deemed Americans divinely destined to inhabit and own all of North America. Even after the application of Manifest Destiny faded, President Lincoln's 1864 Yosemite Grant, and later President Roosevelt's 1906 bill to preserve Yosemite as a National Park, maintained a majestic air around this land. The plethora of photographs produced by Ansel Adams throughout the early1900s also perpetuated this idealization of Yosemite. By choosing to depict a small portion of Yosemite Park that was recently burned, the mural pulls into question why Yosemite has been idealized. What are the ideals around this land? What do they really represent? The process of Van Dyke Brown works to fight the amnesia that popular culture suffers from when trying to recall our past. The technique's origin and apparent visual antiquity

immediately propel the notions of time and history into the conceptual framework of the piece. Although the mural is steeped in historical context, it also acts as a critical analysis of our society's current condition and how these ideals stand in our current culture. The state of the forest has the ability to represent the aftermath of Manifest Destiny and our society's retreat divine missions. Many factors, including more access to information and complicated relationships with other counties, have caused a significant decline in American Patriotism especially noticeable in times of war. Fighting for an American cause used to be accepted as a just one, however, now it widely questioned and criticized by citizens. Also, due to America's dreary economic climate, which has been long affecting our educational and health care systems, American is threatened by China and India in holding the position as an international super power. The state of the forest represents this weakened patriotism. However, just as the forest has the ability to do under the correct circumstances, America can, also, replenish itself. Although, displayed in the conventional Williamson Gallery in 2010, the framed mural was placed on the floor to aid the spectator in viewing the piece as an object rather than a fine artwork. This display choice helps the viewers' disillusionment of the photograph as a window.

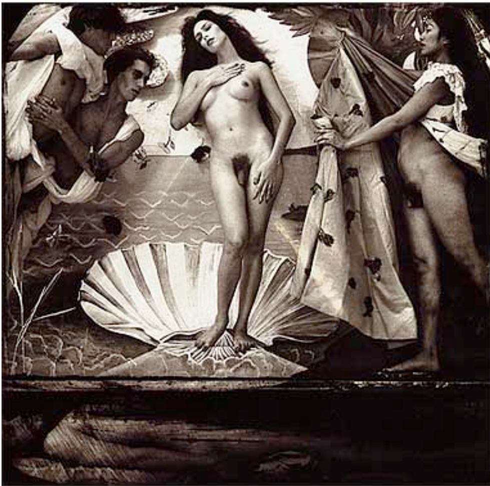
i

Jerry Uelsmann, 1982

ii

Joel-Peter Witkin, 1982

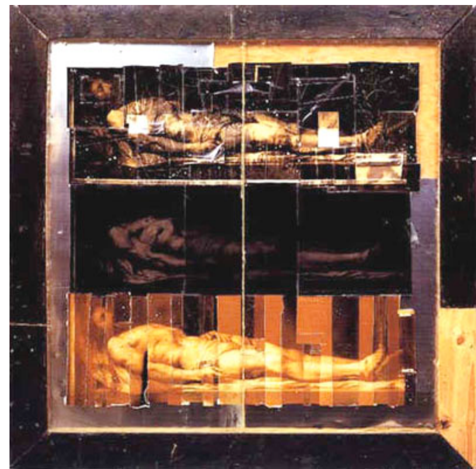
iii



Joel-Peter Witkin, 1988

iv

David Hockney, 1982
v



Mike and Doug Starn, 1985-86

‘

Anselm Kiefer, *Heroic Symbols* 2000

vii

Carrie Mae Weems “Hampton Project

Bibliography

1. Robertson, Jean, and Craig McDaniel. *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print

2. Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of Horror, An Essay of Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1892. Print.

3. Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978. 142-48. Print.

4. Kocur, Zoya, and Simon Leung, eds. *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. Blackwell Ltd, 2005. Print.

5. Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2001. Print.