

[Morton on Blair and Entin and Nudelman, 'Remaking Reality: U.S. Documentary Culture after 1945'](#)

Review published on Sunday, February 9, 2020

Sara Blair, Joseph B. Entin, Franny Nudelman, eds. *Remaking Reality: U.S. Documentary Culture after 1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Illustrations. 251 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-3869-0; \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-3868-3.

Reviewed by David Morton (University of Central Florida) **Published on** H-Podcast (February, 2020)
Commissioned by Robert Cassanello (University of Central Florida)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54670>

When setting out to explain any given social, political, or technological developments, historians, chroniclers, and journalists have a fundamental reliance on how certain selected years are imbued with a certain rhetorical power. In the history of the twentieth century, specific years are used as placeholders to define the starting and ending points for a given topic and help to set a definitive chronology in the minds of readers. In an effort to both periodize and define documentary culture in the United States during the twentieth century, the need to bifurcate events into a “before” and “after” rests on the historical rupture caused by the Second World War. Through the collection of essays offered in *Remaking Reality: U.S. Documentary Culture after 1945*, editors Sara Blair, Joseph B. Entin, and Franny Nudelman set out to define key developments in American documentary practice in the postwar period, as well as to show how specific moments of crisis in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries create “a dialectical relationship between documentarians, their subjects, and the conditions they observe” (p. 3). The editors’ choice of the year “1945 signifies the end of a war that made real the unthinkable of total war, systematic genocide, and planetary annihilation,” while also marking a dramatic moment of departure from previous documentary forms in the medium’s effort to chronicle the upheavals of the next half century (p. 6).

This book addresses how seminal post-1945 movements and moments, such as the atomic bomb, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, environmentalism, and the financial collapse of 2008, have been documented and how these events reshaped activist culture in the United States. This arc is further accentuated by the transformation in recording technology from the advent of the magnetic tape recorder in 1945 and Instamatic and Polaroid cameras, to affordable camcorders, digital recording technologies, cell phone cameras, and the viral disseminating powers of video sharing platforms. Additionally, the volume sets out to expand beyond the confines of a study of documentary film. The inclusion of writing, drawing, and recorded sound in this volume helps the authors “to probe and question the identification of documentary with the promise of immediacy, and exactitude, and to consider its largely unexamined role in producing a record of memory, reflection, and speculation that is by definition imprecise” (p. 7). This ambitious “big tent” approach to both defining and periodizing documentary culture in postwar America offers a profound assessment of the various forms of media that have shaped our national conversation on pressing moral, social, political, and environmental topics.

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Morton on Blair and Entin and Nudelman, 'Remaking Reality: U.S. Documentary Culture after 1945'*. H-Podcast. 02-09-2020.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/84048/reviews/5847851/morton-blair-and-entin-and-nudelman-remaking-reality-us-documentary>
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

Although this volume is not divided up into specific subsections, the selection of essays does offer three essential throughlines of US documentary culture that can be connected to each essay: participatory documentary, documentary histories, and documentary imagining. Grace Elizabeth Hale explains in her study of the civil rights-era documentary record album *Freedom in the Air: A Documentary on Albany, Georgia, 1961-1962*, that participation in documentary culture essentially exists “on a continuum from singing along at a live performance to sitting in at a lunch counter or on a bus”; the spaces incorporated in this definition are from a wide variety of the public sphere, showing how such movements demonstrated “commitment and produced community solidarity” with activist movements (pp. 102-3). By focusing on the role audio documentary makers play in shaping the participatory aspects of American documentary culture, Hale expresses that recordings like *Freedom in the Air* represent a marked shift “from the perspective of participants” toward “what it sounded like to be inside the world activists made for themselves” (p. 109).

In terms of defining documentary histories, Jonathan Kahana and Noah Tsika’s “*Let There Be Light and the Military Talking Picture*” explores the role of reenactment of trauma in “creating a critical history of documentary’s inner spaces of speech and consciousness” (pp. 15-16). *Remaking Reality* begins by examining John Huston’s long-shelved documentary film *Let There Be Light* (1946). The editors’ choice to start their study on documentary culture in postwar America with this particular film helps to set the tone for the myriad of questions and debates that the subsequent essays address. In terms of the film’s role as an example of documentary history, Huston’s interviews with soldiers grappling with what was at the time termed as “battle fatigue,” juxtaposed with scenes of traumatic reenactment, “showcase a manifestly original trope: the symptom of a historic speech disorder” (p. 25). In her essay “*I Saw It!: The Photographic Witness of Barefoot Gen*,” Laura Wexler explores documentary history from the perspective of a comics style that emerged in 1960s Japan known among critics as “atom bomb manga.” This focus helps to showcase a counter-narrative that adds depth but also challenges established narratives on atomic bomb history provided by documentary photography alone. As Wexler explains, the transmedial revision offered in the manga of Keiji Nakazawa “showed how counter-currents and buried precedents can be made available for a post-World War II documentary history.” She notes that to date “the written history of post-1945 documentary photography, is by and large an archive of victors,” which “awaits further development in this vein” (p. 57).

A third throughline, documentary imagining, is explored in Daniel Worden’s “*Speculative Ecology: Rachel Carson’s Environmentalist Documentaries*.” In his assessment, Rachel Carson’s essential environmental science book *Silent Spring* (1962)—which is credited for leading to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency—“as a pressing work of activist documentary has just as much to do with the work’s speculative imaginings as it does with its more traditional journalistic content” (p. 83). Worden defines this approach as “speculative documentary,” which relies on speculative imaginings about doomed futures of impending environmental disasters. Starting with Carson’s work, which Worden argues offers a synthesis of New Deal era documentary stylings, such speculative imaginings have transcended to forms of auditory and visual media and have “helped to make available a mode of documentary writing and filmmaking” that has come to be associated with “climate change, environmental harm, and the necessity of environmental activism” (p. 84).

The strongest aspect of *Remaking Reality* comes from moments where the connective tissue between respective essays is made clearly apparent. Several authors are in direct conversation with one

another and help to build on preestablished definitions and explanations of documentary culture. This is more prevalent in the earlier chapters than later within the work. For example, Nudelman's "Death in Life: Documenting Survival after Hiroshima" directly follows Kahana and Tsika's assessment of Huston's *Let There Be Light*. Nudelman's essay explores the influence of experiments in military psychiatry on two landmark books about Hiroshima survivors—John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) and Robert Lay Lifton's *Death in Life* (1968)—but also serves as a useful bridge to Wexler's "I Saw It!" Nudelman goes as far as to invoke Kahana and Tsika's use of "interview as 'a historical practice: a practice with a history, as well as a practice of history,'" but also builds on this approach by arguing "for its impact on the career of documentary prose as well as documentary film" (p. 37). This approach then connects to Wexler's analysis of counter-narratives presented in Nakazawa's atomic mangas in the 1960s. However, after these first three essays, this connective thread is essentially left behind. Had *Remaking Reality* been structured into the three types of documentary culture or clearly divided into specific sections—either historical or methodological—this shift in organization can be understood.

One overarching criticism that can be offered to this volume is in some ways weighed down by the editors' ambition to provide readers with a comprehensive history of postwar documentary culture, a definitive guideline of best practices in documentary method, and an introduction to alternative forms of documentary. An unintended consequence of the effort to cover such a robust range of material is that the volume's overall sense of purpose occasionally seems to come in and out of focus. The editors do acknowledge that "to highlight the degree to which our cases reach backward, as well as forward and sideways," they must offer "through-lines, or crosscutting interests, that have shaped and emerged from the essays" (p. 9). However, to uninitiated readers with passing knowledge of major figures and moments in the emergence of American documentary culture, this "crosscutting" organization may seem confusing. In the afterword, Matthew Frye Jacobson succinctly summarizes the underlying philosophy of the selection of essays. *Remaking Reality* preaches that "documentary practice itself is not only a kind of pedagogy but also fully an epistemology—a way of knowing, a method of engaged knowing, an engagement *with* knowing" (p. 212, emphasis added). Jacobson's explanation is at once the most encouraging and most tantalizing part of *Remaking Reality*. I found the inclusion of additional and nontraditional approaches to documentary refreshing; they are encouraging openings for potential new areas of study in the subject. At the same time, the uncertainty as to how these different forms engage with the role of documentary in contributing to new knowledge ultimately leaves a multitude of unanswered questions. However, in this sense, this is also the most profound achievement of each of the essays put forth in *Remaking Reality*. Ultimately this work leaves both uninitiated readers and documentary experts with a plethora of new ideas and questions in regard to how documentary making has changed over time, how new and inherited methods of documentary have influenced the activist culture of today, and how tradition and new technologies will change the nature of documentary culture in the United States as the twenty-first century progresses. Blair, Entin, and Nudelman successfully demonstrate the innumerable ways documentary serves as "an indispensable mode of engaging—and transforming—a world in need of repair" (pp. 12-13).

Citation: David Morton. Review of Blair, Sara; Entin, Joseph B.; Nudelman, Franny, eds., *Remaking Reality: U.S. Documentary Culture after 1945*. H-Podcast, H-Net Reviews. February, 2020. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54670>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).