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Representing Postmodern Marginality in Three Documentary Films

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Abstract: In his article "Representing Postmodern Marginality in Three Documentary Films" Robert LeBlanc traces the emergence of new epistemologies of documentary film experience within the cases of three recent films that explore the subject's experience of marginality as central to its constitution as subject. These films -- by Marlon Riggs, Chad Friedrichs, and Jessica Yu -- explore the crises of self-representation engaged by their documentary subjects as these subjects seek to define themselves despite -- and yet through -- their experiences of marginal status, while avoiding a reinforcement of that status that could arise through its continued placement into narrative. The essay's exploration of the constitutive multiformity of documentary filmmaking suggests an augmentation of existing theories about the relevance of fictional and nonfiction narrative in postmodern documentary, as indicated by film theorist Michael Renov. LeBlanc applies Vivian Sobchack's theories of the intersubjective nature of film communication to explore the role of direct viewer address in articulating crises of self-representation. As the essay explores the filmmakers' efforts to further the self-representational projects of their outsider-artist subjects, it asserts that some forms of documentary epistephilia may in fact turn inward as they articulate the implosive capacity of epistephilia to draw the marginal subject within the bounds of recognizable answers and ends.

Robert LeBLANC

Representing Postmodern Marginality in Three Documentary Films

In her article "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," Vivian Sobchack applies Jean-Pierre Meunier's film theory to the experience of documentary viewing in postmodernity. She writes, "In a critical move that does not assume that the cinematic object is irreal merely because it is absent, Meunier points out that this fundamental absence characteristic of all cinematic representation is always modified by our personal and cultural knowledge of an object's existential position as it relates to our own" (242). Sobchack proceeds to advance a very useful phenomenology that reconceives documentary film within postmodernity, but her phenomenology only brings us to a lacuna in our understandings of postmodern documentary film, a genre in which filmmakers are increasingly drawn to human subjects whose existential position is defined in relation to the spectator through the position's marginality. What new crises of hyperreality, irreality, and representation are instantiated, and even instigated, by the trend among contemporary documentarians to pursue subjects who inhabit the margins of mainstream society? How do these documentarians embrace, downplay, or otherwise interact with the audience's epistephilia regarding these marginal subjects?

I present in the article at hand close readings of three contemporary documentary films that take US-Americans in the margins as their subjects. The first, Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, explores the black gay community in San Francisco, and reckons with that community's history of underrepresentation in its efforts toward a widely accessible cultural document. Riggs thereby instantiates a cinematic space of struggle, of difference, of ingroup expression that can work to disturb a viewer's notions of cultural insiders versus outsiders. The two other documentaries, Chad Freidrichs's *Jandek on Corwood* and Jessica Yu's *In the Realms of the Unreal*, present investigations into reclusive outsider artists and continually straddle the problematic boundary line that separates "images we regard as documentary representations of 'the real' from those we regard as real representations of a 'fiction'" (Sobchack 241). Close readings of these latter two film texts will yield insights into the shifting nature of documentary epistephilia in a postmodern moment when marginal figures both demand and resist onscreen representation.

While Riggs's film differs in important ways from Yu's and Freidrichs's films, the three works highlight a cinematic fascination with the marginal figures of society. These are, in all three films, figures whose marginality is always already mediated by a public all too ready to see them as outsiders. When viewed together, these three films point to new potentialities in documentary filmmaking that have only arisen in and from this crisis of representing the marginal. When the documentary gaze is cast to these outer limits of US-American society, it is forced to simulate the subject position of marginality through the available discourses of the postmodern mainstream, leading to hyperrealism and a kind of incongruity. Jean Baudrillard suggests that "the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself" (468). This paper will be at pains to illustrate, through the lens of Baudrillard's theories of postmodernity, how these new potentialities in filmmaking can destabilize the binaries between real and irreal, between fictional narrative film and nonfiction documentary film. My goal will also be to offer a critique of Sobchack's phenomenology of nonfictional film experience while also building from it, to challenge her ideas about viewers' relations to the absent cinematic object through my examination of cases in which said object presents itself to the culture as an object with a history of marginality.

When Marlon Riggs says, "I listen for my own silent implosion" in a voiceover near the end of *Tongues Untied*, he is referring both to his anticipation of a tragically silent death from AIDS and to an overarching element of the black gay experience that is shot through the documentary from start to finish. This element is that of silence, or, more generally, of absence, and Riggs's articulation of the element represents one of the central conflicts driving the "story" of the film. Of course, the articulation of absence can and does also introduce some formidable pragmatic obstacles. How does a filmmaker introduce the experience of absence, or show us places where someone or some group should be and is not? For Riggs, the surmounting of this technical challenge runs parallel to his achievement of a sociopolitical goal, and thus his use of such devices as black backdrop screens, prolonged silences, and vignettes about moments of social dysfunction and asociality works more to further his film discourse than to repair shortcomings in it. Absence has, in Riggs's film, become a motif in itself. Whereas for other documentaries absences of visual or auditory data only increase epistephilia and defer an imaginable moment of "completion" of the documentary's goal, the motif of

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absence in Riggs serves to posit an ultimate unrepresentability of certain events and subject positions within restrictive social codes, and further to posit the injustice of such an unrepresentability.

Riggs's plaint, expressed with this creative use of cinematic absence, is so fully imbricated with his awareness of the viewer that it makes evident what Sobchack calls "the intersubjective basis of objective cinematic communication" (38). When the screen turns black for sustained periods between sections of the film, viewers are called out in their engagement as "participants in dynamically and directionally reversible acts that reflexively and reflectively constitute the *perception of expression* and the *expression of perception*" (38). When silence is offered up as the only suitable audio for the moments immediately following a difficult question in which a black gay man considers his own erasure from society, the viewer perceives that humanity's expression of stunned silence while also marking the man's earnest demeanor, his vulnerability, his need to belong. Thus the viewer may, as Sobchack suggests, reverse the direction of film experience and receive data about perception of expression. Viewers, too, listen for the silence of Riggs's implosion, and insofar as they become aware that he is also the director of the film and an origin of its filmmakerly gaze, they perceive the sociopolitical messages not only in his conclusions, but in his very epistephilia. Thus, *Tongues Untied* is a postmodern film experience in that its moments of hyperreal expression (such as the "Snapthology" segment and the voguing segment) are endlessly deferred in a broader expression of the hyperreal subject position inhabited by this group of black gay men. It is mainly in the employment of strategic absences and silences that Riggs steps beyond the bounds of traditional documentary and allows the crisis of self-definition within the black gay community to become the very thrust of the film, rather than an obstacle in its communication.

The film's insistence on probing the experience of marginality in the black gay community leads it to experiment with form so as to position the lives of its subjects in an outsider space, a space in which traditional documentary devices are to be cast aside wherever they prove ill-fitting. Riggs narrates his own coming of age, and then follows upon that with the story of his quest for identity, a quest that leaves him marginalized with regard to mainstream culture, black subcultures, and gay white subcultures. Sheila Petty notes, "The narrative premise of the video is very complex because Riggs negotiates, not within one cultural space, but four: black culture, white culture, gay culture, and black gay culture. This makes generalization, either about his narrative structure, or his thematic material, almost impossible" (418). Indeed, Riggs's acts of negotiation between and among cultural groups position him as an outsider, and, though Petty finds it impossible to "generalize" about this mode of filmmaking, there is much to be gained from examination of Riggs's negotiation of the crisis of marginality.

Riggs presents a challenge to established notions of the documentary film that refigure its conventions and structures for a postmodern age. Traditional documentaries, even when their subjects had been slightly off the mainstream, wove a steady current of voiceovers and footage, occasionally intercut with essential B-roll images. Riggs's postmodern documentary, on the other hand, breaks from these genre conventions and deliberately disrupts narratives, subverts the gaze of the scopophiliac, and dwells in the unrepresentable rather than declaring documentary cinema to be a cure-all for uncertainty of identity. Riggs's self-narration is disrupted both visually and verbally by the intercutting of a child's utterance of "punk" (alongside various other racist and homophobic slurs) with his storytelling. This approach causes viewers to question the need for linear narrative in a documentary film, emphasizing the constant state of disrupted selfhood experienced by the narrator himself. Petty observes pointedly, "In the final disruption sequence, the shots of the mouths are intercut, and the effect of collision between the angles is that of Riggs being crushed and pounded by the violence of the epithets" (421). Beretta E. Smith-Shomade assesses Riggs's disturbance of our expectations for nonfiction film exposition, arguing that "Riggs juxtaposes words, music, and sound to accost his audience" (1126). The film features images of disembodied mouths speaking in its insistence that "mainstream" voices should be refigured as potential intruders to self-definition, rather than sites and wellsprings of self-definition.

Riggs's use of the postmodern body is not limited to that scene, but is observable also in his decision to include his own naked body in an early shot, thereby subverting the principle of seductive concealment of the human body by revealing himself visually from the beginning. Riggs presents himself, to borrow a phrase from Chuck Kleinhans, "naked in black void," and he accompanies this image with an exploration of the multivalent roles played by silence in his life (109). While the stark black backdrop provides a visual echo for the significance of Riggs's race and suggests the danger of dark skin vanishing into the darkness of nonexistence, the revelation of the filmmaker's naked body turns the notion of visual scopophilia on its head. In this second instance, Riggs's cinematic approach suggests a need to break with mainstream film technique in order to best depict the unconventional

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way in which the black gay community is seeking to define itself (other methods of self-definition having proven unfeasible).

In a third instance of the postmodern cinematic voice in the film, Riggs allows his epistephilia to culminate not in answers, but in the endless proliferation of questions as a means toward the illustration of social injustice toward the black gay community. When a straight black activist's mouth (again disembodied in an extreme close-up), asks, "Come the final throw-down, is he black or gay?" this question is not pursued in any traditional journalistic way. It is instead positioned as a revelation in and of itself, a revelation of the ills of a mainstream that would force black gays to go entirely without a cultural identity, the ills of a mainstream that would rather, and tragically, erase them altogether from its ranks. Riggs's epistephilia as he seeks to reveal the truth of this community is thus directed not at broadening the embrace of mainstream society by seeking knowledge about its marginal figures, but rather at coming to new ways of thinking about what constitutes mainstream society itself. That is to say, the questions asked by unsympathetic outgroups (straight black culture, gay white culture, etc.) are not answered but rather epistemologically critiqued. Thus his postmodern rendering of epistephilia succeeds in destabilizing the binary between insiders and outsiders. The motifs of absence and silence remind viewers that the many established modes of language that are available to explain these men's marginality would only succeed in reinforcing that marginality, and thus in undoing Riggs's communicative act of documentary filmmaking.

Riggs redefines the socially topical documentary film as a location for the expression of silence itself, rather than simply the representation of noise to end a cultural silence. Yu and Freidrichs position their documentaries within this same paradox, and they instigate this same crisis of giving documentary voice to those whose voicelessness has defined their cultural subject positions. However much the similarities of Yu's and Freidrichs's films to Riggs's film will be useful in allowing me to come to conclusions about representations of marginality, these documentaries will be shown to run both parallel and oblique to *Tongues Untied*. Yu's and Freidrichs's documentaries on outsider artists make use of direct quotation of musical and literary works in order to better explore the minds of their subjects, much as Riggs relies heavily on borrowed poetry, doo-wop music, and performance art to convey an approximation of the black gay experience. The central difference between the two modes is that Freidrichs and Yu feature subjects whose works of art constitute the basis for their marginality, whereas Riggs's subjects have been marginalized by society's restrictive attitudes about race and sexuality and then turn to artistic expression having already been labeled as marginal. But my close reading of these three films over and against each other will seek to explore their stylistic border crossings of the line between fiction and nonfiction film, an already blurry line that Michael Renov suggests "will become an ever more active site of contestation and play" as documentary film moves into postmodernity (318). As I turn to these two more recent films, my close readings will continue to examine the role of absence/silence motifs in documenting subjects whose marginality within the arts world throws into relief the nature of our wider society's margins. Why would an artist situate him or herself in a position of extreme marginality? More centrally, what reconfigurations of epistephilia are instantiated by the filmmakers' decisions to document these artists?

When director Freidrichs and producer Paul Fehler chose to make a documentary about the outsider musician Jandek around 2003, they were aware that their subject was a complete recluse who did not grant interviews and who had never allowed the release of any video footage of his music or of himself. During the course of Jandek's lengthy career, his only act of self-expression to any artistic community or public sphere had been his do-it-yourself release of 37 albums on the label "Corwood Industries." His music had increasingly attracted interest and fans from the outsider music community and from hipsters of all stripes (including Kurt Cobain, Beck, and the editors of *Spin* magazine), but his presence as a public figure in the outsider music scene had been defined as much by his enigma and reclusion as by his music and songwriting. The allure of this subject to documentarians can be explained readily as a manifestation of the same epistephilia that drew Errol Morris to film the eccentric locals in his landmark film *Vernon, Florida*. Yet, Freidrichs's proposition was to capture in documentary film a subject who flat-out *refused* to be captured on videotape, despite his passion for self-releasing audio recordings of his atonal blues-folk songs.

How would such a documentary be filmed, and moreover how would it be viewed? Guillermo Castro, in a review of the finished film, observes, "While some filmmakers might've been daunted by the sheer scarcity of information, Friedrichs [*sic*] and Fehler saw it as an opportunity to create a different kind of music documentary, one that investigates the ways in which fans fill in the gaps between what's known about a particular artist and what's left to the imagination" ("*Jandek on Corwood*: The Mystery Is in the Music"). Freidrichs shifts his focus from the musician to his reception, and in so doing he furthers a project of deliberate mystery that he reads into Jandek's artistic project.

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Freidrichs says, "We were more interested in people's individual responses to Jandek … We were more interested in how a mythology is formed, given that there is this dearth of information … This is a basic psychological inquiry rather than a sociological one" (Castro). On the DVD's commentary track, Freidrichs elaborates on this idea of representing the enigma and absence of his subject as a means of furthering (rather than dissecting) Jandek's artistic project, mentioning his interest in "stories about Jandek, stories that either refute or coalesce with the mystery." The diegetic arc of the film traces a shift in the cinematic gaze from the titular subject to the critical and popular reception of that subject in the subject's absence.

The struggle to represent a thoroughly marginal figure amounted to a similar challenge to that faced by Riggs: how to capture a subject's history of underrepresentation without simply failing to represent the subject yet again. Riggs and Freidrichs both wanted to bring their marginal subjects into the light of their cameras, but both attempted to tell the story of marginality rather than unfittingly situating their subjects within mainstream frameworks. Freidrichs assesses his metatextual approach, stating that *Jandek on Corwood* became a "film about celebrity, and negative celebrity, the idea of somebody building up an image over time based on a non-presence." The filmmaker comments on the challenges inherent to his testing of the bounds of the documentary form in a variety of tones, ranging from that of the theorizing auteur to that of the frustrated cutting-room craftsman. He states that his goal as director was to "really try to express the idea of a mystery in the few images of complete desolation," and to "make the film more consistent with the mood of Jandek's music, which is very sparse and very dark." Freidrichs seems to have conceived his film project as an organic outgrowth of Jandek's aesthetics, and yet Freidrichs admits to pressing pragmatic crises that faced him when he confronted the impossibility of interviewing (or even including secondhand video footage of) his reclusive subject. He even complains plaintively that, as a documentarian interested in Jandek, he does not "have much visuality to rely on to make filler," and Fehler concludes that the crisis the filmmakers faced was "constraining, but liberating in a way." This crisis of representation reveals the logical end of documentary epistephilia. To wit, if we as viewers want to come to know the unknowable subject through film experience, our knowledge of the subject will always already be mediated by the subject's history of having been unknown.

It will be useful to look further at the texture of Freidrichs's work, shot through as it is by the crisis of unrepresentability instantiated by an outsider artist who begs to be analyzed and engaged, and yet who shuns all publicity and video exposure. The bulk of the film's running time is taken up by interviews with outsider music critics and aficionados, most of whom seem eager to probe the mysteries of Jandek's marginality. In lieu of the usual performance, interview, and candid footage of the artist himself, Freidrichs inserts his still photography of Jandek's album cover art and various Jandek "artifacts" such as invoices from his ostensibly self-created record label, occasional handwritten notes to purchasers and radio stations, and advertisements placed obscurely in the backs of music industry magazines. Michael Sandlin describes Freidrichs's necessarily oblique bent as follows: "This documentary on defiantly obscure indie-rock cult figure Jandek reveals not so much the man-behind-the-myth, but rather, the myth-behind-the-myth" ("Withholding"). Freidrichs could probably have obsessively tracked down the origin of cashed checks made out to Corwood Industries, or relentlessly hounded the staff of the record plant that presses Jandek's releases in small amounts, in an attempt to, as Mark Athitakis puts it in a review of the film, "unmask" this marginal figure and force him into a mainstream framework as a pop music celebrity (*Filmcritic.com*). Freidrichs's approach is instead to embrace the unknowability of his subject and interweave it delicately with his own epistephilia, with his own desire as documentarian to present some kind of "truth" to the serious-minded viewer that many film critics presuppose as the documentary audience.

The "filler," as Freidrichs modestly terms it, used in the film takes the place of traditional interview and performance footage found in most pop music documentaries. This "filler" gives tone to the film and builds upon the film's thesis that Jandek's representations stem necessarily from an engagement with his absence rather than from traditional research, evaluation, or musical appreciation techniques. Freidrichs features recurring images of a full moon, a typewriter, a reel-to-reel recorder, curtains, a bleeding chunk of human brain, a bottle of whiskey, and others to suppose a phantasmagorical presence for Jandek's identity as artist. These images are presented in the context of Jandek's songs, and one is struck by the fact that, although some of Jandek's lyrics are vaguely foreboding or disturbing, the representation of phantasmagoria is again derived as much from Jandek's notoriously stubborn absence from the music mainstream as it is from his actual songwriting. Freidrichs's choice of images seems to veer wildly and romantically apart from the scant body of knowledge on his subject and into pure speculation about what kind of analysis might even be ventured on the basis of this precious little concrete imagery. Mark Athitakis remarks about these sequences of more or less

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random foreboding images that "Watching the film feels, appropriately, conspiratorial" (*Filmcritic.com*). Fehler remarks in his commentary that the recurring images were intended to be frustratingly partial representations of the subject, and represent "what Chad and I project onto Jandek's normal life." Walter Benjamin explores this tendency toward a romanticized presentation of that which seems phantasmagorical in its marginality and unknowability in his essay "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia": "Any serious exploration of occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious. For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process), as the profane illumination of reading about telepathic phenomena" (188).

Walter Benjamin stresses that efforts at documenting the phantasmagorical or unknowable will end in a focus back onto the efforts themselves rather than forward onto some suspected "truth" or "reality" behind the phantasmagoria. Freidrichs's only conclusion after his presentation of these "filler" objects in lieu of the interview/performance footage that traditional documentary audiences crave is an open-ended one: Jandek's representation has called into question what is so mysterious, even what is so marginal, about his reclusive behaviors. After each phantasmagorical sequence of "filler" images points up the inevitable inadequacy of attempts to explore a visual realness of Jandek, the filmmakers return to interview sequences with Jandek's passionate critics. One of them succeeds in, as Benjamin puts it, penetrating the mystery and perceiving "the impenetrable as everyday" (188). Sandlin observes this, writing, "Of all the talking heads, Beat Happening/K-records founder Calvin Johnson has the only real breakthrough moment: Why, he asks, are certain artists automatically labeled reclusive maniacs just because they shun mainstream media and reject traditional self-marketing gambits?" ("Withholding"). The only lesson gleaned by Freidrichs from his romantically passionate leap into the obscure phantasmagoria of Jandek's marginal universe is one of his own filmmaking and the crisis instantiated when a documentary probes the margins of society without first questioning its epistemological basis in society's mainstream. Freidrichs, like most of Jandek's bewildered but bemused commentators, is ready to lay bare his processes of coming to know Jandek as subject, even if such a cinematic act manages only to articulate Jandek's absence from such modes of expression and perception. Ultimately, Freidrichs's documentary manages only to articulate Jandek's absence from our film experience as viewers, even as we engage in an epistephilia around this figure by watching a film with Jandek's name in the title.

Freidrichs's documentary may be viewed in the same postmodern category as Riggs's oeuvre in that his project seeks to pursue a similar fictionality and direct presentation of art, putting forth these devices as alternative gateways to truth. The use of performance art footage and musical performances as direct evidences of lifestyle and identity in *Tongues Untied* serve to remind viewers of the unsuitability of traditional modes of self disclosure for a marginalized group whose identity has already been rejected on its own terms by the mainstream. Freidrichs does not fail as a documentary filmmaker in failing to track down his subject for a face-to-face definitive interview, nor does he fall short in failing to pursue the tough questions about Jandek's biography that might be misinterpreted as having been his original goals. Though Freidrichs does not shy away from traditional revelations of interesting facts or from establishing shots that familiarize viewers in a basic way with the subject matter, he does elide a traditional tidy conclusion. Instead of a cinematic voice that stands outside of an already marginal subject and offers a smug summary of salient points, Freidrichs communicates with the viewer via an expression of his perceptions of the difficulty of adequate representation of society's margins. Sandlin notes that "much like its inscrutable subject, the film leads you to the brink of revelation and then leaves you hanging" ("Withholding").

Freidrichs's furthering of Jandek's artistic project works to blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction film, and reinforces the usefulness of Sobchack's phenomenology of documentary looking. Having established the intersubjective basis of cinematic communication, Sobchack places us in her perspective as documentary viewer: "In that I have, from the first, posited the existence of what these images represent and am thus engaged in some degree of constitutive and evocative activity, the documentary image is not completely autonomous, but still connected to and intermediary between myself and what I perceive to be a 'real' unknown person or event 'in general'" (251). When we look at a person who is not merely unknown, but who is presented as challenging the outer limits of the knowable, we are not simply left "hanging," but we engage along with the filmmaker in co-constituting a perceived marginal 'real' person named (in this case) Jandek. Freidrichs's film

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demonstrates the ability of irreal images to proliferate and fill the visual void instantiated by an absent subject to be perceived. Absence is thus given a cinematic presence, even if only through a redefinition of the documentary that shades off into fictional forms of representation. The documentary becomes not about what we can learn, but about what it is in our epistemologies as viewers that makes it impossible for us to understand. This shading-off into fictional forms of representation is further shown to be not only unproblematic, but crucial for documentary representation of outsider arts figures in Jessica Yu's 2004 film *In the Realms of the Unreal*. The title of the film, though it comes directly from the title of its subject's 15,000-page fantasy novel, serves to point up Yu's need to blur the lines separating documentary from fiction filmmaking. Yu's subject is Henry Darger, the outsider artist, novelist, and hospital janitor who produced his works in total isolation from the 1920s until shortly before his death in 1973, whereupon his work was discovered in his rented room in Chicago and introduced to great acclaim in the outsider arts world.

Like Freidrichs, Yu starts the viewer with requisite biographical exposition, like most traditional documentarians would, but then shades gradually into fictional modes of filmmaking. Yu stops just short of presenting a film adaptation of Darger's paintings or prose, and allows her documentary to reside astraddle the line between fiction and nonfiction in its efforts to represent an absent subject. In an interview about the film included on its DVD, Yu suggests that she wants to "tell three stories" and place them parallel with each other. The three stories are firstly Darger's life story, secondly the story of how he has been perceived both as man and as artist, and thirdly the story that he created in his fictional work. Insofar as Yu manages to interweave these three narrative threads, she manages to represent a man whose life story is bound up with fictions and is aware of its own hyperreality. Yu also manages to explore the absence of identity available to a figure existing on society's margins, and further, the ways in which marginal figures *use* absence as fodder for identity itself. When Yu expresses her idea that "the film could be about the imaginative drive of one person," she leads to the idea that his marginality (more than just his imagination) was a factor in his process of shaping a self-identity.

Whereas Freidrichs was faced with the extreme challenge of filming without even a single verifiable photograph of his subject, Yu made use of the three existing photographs of Darger frequently throughout the film. But her several still shots on these black-and-white photographs are geared as much toward reinforcing the concept that traditional modes of exposition will fall short, as toward actually accomplishing exposition of information about Darger's physical self. Yu explores the traditional epistephiliac gaze only long enough to illustrate its inadequacy for her marginal subject, and then moves into these second and third narrative threads, or "stories," and begins to problematize the normally taken-for-granted phenomenology by which we experience films. Instead of using the camera to express her filmmakerly perception of a biographical subject, Yu shifts into unusual visual content, including some sequences in which the camera attempts to present the unknown eye of Darger in its assessment of his aesthetics as artist. "We tried to have a sense of how he experienced that room," Yu says in the abovementioned interview, in an explanation of sequences in which the camera enters Darger's living and working space (which has been preserved by his former landlords since his 1973 death). In abandoning her own cinematic voice and allowing the camera to represent the vantage point of another, Yu challenges traditional notions of the documentary form and suggests the need for new and shifting epistemologies in representing social outsiders. Conversely, Yu features a sequence in which we see the closed door of Darger's apartment from the outer hallway, with the camera gradually closing in but never quite shutting out the space around it (the doorjamb and hallway walls). A voiceover, intercut with interview snippets regarding Darger's reclusive ways and perceived habit of talking to himself, tells us that Darger began to be perceived as increasingly out of touch with his neighbors and the world around him. This sequence offers visual articulation of the idea that the marginal figure can only be rendered in traditional cinematic modes of exposition as the unknowable outsider, and is only brought into cinematic presence when and if the viewer looks to the subject's history of absence as the grounds for perception.

Yu acknowledges the crisis instantiated by her attempts to depict the utterly marginal on documentary film, but she also looks to the instigation of this crisis by contemporary filmmakers as evidence of our increased understanding of the phenomenology of film experience. Speaking on this spate of recent documentaries about marginal figures (and thus documentaries that explore the very idea of marginality), she argues, "Audiences and filmmakers are more excited about the ideas of different ways to tell the story, taking more liberties in order to get to a deeper truth." We have thus far explored the ways in which these documentaries crisscross the lines between fiction and nonfiction, between traditional modes of epistephilia and postmodern focus on the unknowable as knowledge

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itself. Renov carries this one step further in his speculation that these recent tendencies might be best understood as a complete refiguring of cinematic desire and gaze: "I find the refusal [of earlier critics] to articulate this epistephilia in relation to desire unduly rationalist in its alignment of documentary wholly with consciousness rather than in traffic with unconscious processes. I challenge that position's preference for knowledge effects over pleasurable or ecstatic looking and for its enthronement of sobriety at the expense of the evocative and delirious. I would argue for the documentary gaze as constitutively multiform, embroiled with conscious motives and unconscious desires, driven by curiosity no more than by terror and fascination" (321).

Renov brings us to better understand these documentaries and also the expressions of motive put forth by their filmmakers. When Yu suggests "taking more liberties in order to get to a deeper truth," or when Freidrichs says he wanted to "really try to express the idea of a mystery," or when Riggs says, "We have to begin to heal ourselves by going through all the doors that we have locked and tried to forget about" (qtd. in Kleinhans 110), these filmmakers are suggesting that the documentary form be broadened to encompass modes of evocation and play that might lead to postmodern ways of knowing its subjects, whereas those subjects would be at risk of appearing only as absences through the traditional documentary lens. Renov's statement leads us to a recognition that these three films all revive the element of pleasurable looking in the previously rationalist domain of the documentary. Whereas the filmmakers often only acknowledge the usefulness of borrowed texts in their conglomeration of footage, it should more accurately be viewed as a positioning of fictional and performative discourses as direct responses to our epistephilia toward these marginal subjects. When Riggs includes performances by singers and poets in "black void" (Kleinhans 109), he advances these artists' epistemologies of identity as more meaningful than those perpetuated by the mainstream and purported as the "real" facts about the black gay community. These black gay men relate their existential positions in Riggs's documentary by embracing the hyperreal in their postmodern culture, and then by producing more suitable attempts at self-definition through film presences that challenge our traditionally accepted notions of the documentary form.

In an interesting corollary to the advancement of this new approach to documentary as practiced by Riggs, Freidrichs, and Yu, all three filmmakers feature scenes in which postmodern ways of representing the subject progress gradually into prominence in our film experience, before finally "taking over" the screen and soundtrack. In *Tongues Untied*, one of the voiceover artists begins to repeat a sentence in a quiet voice and allows it to crescendo into something louder and much more distinct. The sentence at first might best be spelled as, "Noweethihaswefuh," and it punctuates various obliquely rendered images of a sexual encounter between two members of the black gay community. As the usefulness of traditional journalistic explanations of sexually transmitted disease wanes over and against the desperation of the lovers for intimacy in their harshly alienating society, the mantra "Noweethihaswefuh" become clearer as "Now we think as we fuck...this nut might kill us." Not only has the performative and desire-driven element of the piece's epistephilia driven away the truth-based reportage that marked earlier documentary, but this displacement of traditional documentary form by a postmodern film voice has provided one of the film's most conclusive and profound moments for showcasing the solidarity possible for a black gay identity. Thus, for Riggs, Renov's suggestion of rethinking the documentary gaze as constitutively multiform was well founded, as Riggs's cinematic project involves the necessary destabilization of the binary of documentary epistephilia and fictional scopophilia, for a new understanding of film expression.

In the Jandek documentary, Freidrichs includes a similar "creeping-in" of postmodern filmmaking to displace a traditional exposition sequence. After various Jandek commentators have proposed increasingly arcane and fanciful readings of the artist's project (Sandlin calls this point "a laughable crescendo of wild psychiatric speculation" ["Withholding"]), a wordless chanting from one of Jandek's most unfathomable compositions begins growing in volume until it is almost drowning out the voices of the critics. Then Freidrichs launches into the most indulgently phantasmagorical sequence in the film, a sequence that even includes the bizarre image of a cheeseburger inflated to larger than life size, accompanied by this point only by Jandek's wordless warbling. The scene suggests that efforts at a traditional explication have proven self-perpetuating and not very fruitful, except in generating interest in this songwriter's body of work, which by now has been argued by interviewee Byron Coley to contain a "theoretical presence." Freidrichs then decides to let Jandek's parade of phantasmagorical imagery take hold and quite literally drown out the traditional methods of documentary exposition. Freidrichs latched on to these traditional methods at first, in his efforts to track down anything and everything that might illuminate the obscure world of this outsider figure. It should be said that the interviewees are quite interestingly committed and passionate; Freidrichs even coins the odd phrase "Jandek studies" at one point, as if Jandek had become, in his iconoclasm, a entire self-consumed

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discipline of learning. However, the use of interviewees and occasional scraps of Jandek memorabilia (unrevealing receipts, simplistic print advertisements without graphics, etc.) proves to be unsatisfactory for Freidrichs's epistephiliac gaze and the viewer is left to indulge in a culminating pastiche of incongruous images that really have little to do with the Jandek the musician and have everything to do with his fascinating resistance to documentary representation.

The film then reaches its "silent implosion," when the sequence ends with the image of a telephone and the one extant interview with someone purporting to be Jandek is played over the film's soundtrack. This phone interview, dated from 1985, occurs between Jandek and music critic John Trubee. The man representing himself as Jandek seems entirely uncomfortable and refuses to answer many of Trubee's questions, with the notable exception of a question that pertains to Jandek's willingness to ship out albums to listeners via mail order. As is found throughout these three documentaries of marginal figures, the use of pauses and silence serves to illustrate the unsuitability of traditional language to communicate the knowledge sought. During his commentary track, Fehler remarks excitedly after the most extended of these moments of cinematic absence and silence that "this pause is completely unadulterated, one hundred percent!" His satisfaction with this silence reinforces the idea that marginal subjects are often perceived by filmmakers as silent/absent, and thus the use of silence works actively but paradoxically here to express a void and presence at the center of the film. Fehler's excitement suggests his apprehension of what Sobchack refers to as our "mutual capacity for and possession of experience through common structures of embodied existence, through similar modes of being-in-the-world" (*Viewing Positions* 38). In this instance, the common structure of embodied existence is absence itself, mediated further by the disembodying technology of the telephone interview, and put forth to the effect of utter isolation against the possibilities of limitless intersubjective cinematic communication.

In Yu's *In the Realms of the Unreal*, a similar device of displacing traditional modes of documentary exposition occurs at the points in the film where a voiceover, representing Darger's voice, is presented in a muffled way. Some of Darger's written words are introduced to the soundtrack at a too-quiet volume before this volume grows louder, and other words, such as those spoken from "behind the closed door" of Darger's apartment (referenced in an earlier portion of this paper), are never fully articulated. This reinforces Yu's tragic viewpoint that Darger's death before his works of art reached the public prevented his marginal voice from ever reaching its hearers. However, Darger's self-willed isolation from society ensured that his words would only be heard as muffled utterances by those living near him, and Yu is aware of Darger's own embrace of his marginal position. Whatever its origins, this documentary ensures that Darger's status as a marginal figure is presented as a point of origin of the crisis that propels the film forward. The epistephilia that Yu and other like-minded documentarians evince is complicated by the marginality of the outsider artist as subject, but it is in and from this complication that a more complete reading of the artist's project may be presented.

These three films signal a new trend in documentary cinema that locates an epistephilia in the difficult terrain of society's margins. Riggs, Freidrichs, and Yu take on challenging tasks as they articulate the subject positions of marginalized and otherwise marginal figures, and each of these three documentaries points to the idea that new epistemologies of nonfictional film exposition are necessary to construct a film presence for these subjects who have found ready-made social constructs unsuitable for their identities and goals. Whereas Riggs's subjects sought the creation of a new identity for black gay males that was located entirely outside the frameworks that had tried to confine and erase them from US-American society, Freidrich's and Yu's outsider arts subjects sought the redefinition of critical reception in arts media in order to allow their appearance as absences to be resituated through postmodern ways of coming to know the artist's body of work. *Jandek on Corwood* and *In the Realms of the Unreal* start from traditional modes of capturing an artist's canon on film, but they conclude by blurring the lines between documentary and fictional film in their efforts to reach what Yu called "a deeper truth" in her interview. To return to Baudrillard's theories of the hyperreal and its connection back to earlier modes of experience, let us end by reconsidering his meditation on those who managed to define themselves without presence: "Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original—things are doubled by their own scenario. But this doubling does not signify, as it did traditionally, the imminence of their death—they are already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive" (460). If these marginal subjects have absented themselves from life and managed to replace themselves in onscreen portrayals with, paradoxically, their own absence, they have allowed the marginal segments of society to be viewed in context with the

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hyperreal mainstream, in films that point up the deeper truths found in a resistance to the bounds imposed by traditional modes of documentary film.

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