

Awesome: I ... Shot That!:

User-Generated Content in Documentary Film

Jennifer Porst

Cinema and Media Studies, UCLA

e-mail: jenporst@mac.com

Awesome: I ... Shot That!: User-Generated Content in Documentary Film

In the 1950's, Jean Rouch advocated what he called a "shared anthropology" and allowed the subjects of his documentaries a voice in the production of his films. He believed that polyphony would enable his films to more fully reflect that which he was trying to represent. That interest in more closely approximating the "real" has existed in documentary film from the beginning, and just as technological advances like the lighter, more portable cameras used by Flaherty, the even smaller 16mm cameras used by John Grierson, and the lavalier mikes used by Jean Rouch made fundamental changes in the production of documentary film, digital technology is profoundly affecting documentary film today. The increased accessibility and availability of filmmaking tools such as cheaper and more user-friendly video cameras encourage amateur filmmakers to document their own experiences, and the relatively low cost of videotape allows the flexibility to shoot with more freedom than when filmmakers were constrained by the prohibitive expense of film. Only in the last few years, however, since the internet has provided unparalleled opportunities for alternative methods of immediate and widespread distribution of amateur content, has the trend of incorporating polyphony through user-generated content in documentary film proliferated. In 2004, the Beastie Boys' Adam Yauch, aka director Nathaniel Hornblower, pushed the limits of polyphony by using footage shot by fifty different audience members to create a documentary film of the band's concert at Madison Square Garden. Ultimately, *Awesome: I ... Shot That!* suggests that limits to the effectiveness of polyphony do exist and, when crossed, result in a text where all voices meld into an indistinguishable cacophony; that while user-generated content may provide points-of-view previously unavailable to the documentary filmmaker, the originally democratic intent of user-generated content is ultimately usurped by the point of view of the editor in documentary films; and, finally, that the

innovations of this type of documentary filmmaking suggest a move into a new era of documentary and necessitate a reconsideration and revision of the language and categories currently used to discuss documentary film.

Awesome: I ... Shot That! was shot, as described by Adam Yauch, by “a bunch of untrained camera operators. But that gives the film sincerity. The people that shot it, were feeling it.”¹ Yauch’s inspiration for the production of this film came from video footage of their concerts that had been captured on cell phones and posted online. Yauch recalled:

One night when we were on tour I looked at the Beastie Boys message boards and saw a short clip of us running out on stage at the beginning of a show. It was maybe thirty seconds long, and was shot with a camera phone, so it was extremely low-res and had a bit of a strobe effect because of the low frame rate. The fact that it was hand-held looked cool. I liked the energy of it and thought it would be interesting to document a whole concert that way.²

The Beastie Boys’ interest in collaborating with fans in the production of content is genuine and apparent in everything from the professed motivation for the making of this film, to their website where fans can download a cappella versions of their songs in order to create their own remixes and their Criterion Collection DVD that allows viewers to mix different versions of the music and videos to create their own videos. The press release for the film explained it was “in this same spirit of collaboration, [that] Yauch was inspired to invite the group’s fans to serve as concert photographers.”³

Three days before their appearance at Madison Square Garden in October of 2004, the band posted a notice on their website inviting fans with tickets to the concert to sign up as camera people. The fifty fans selected to videotape the show were selected largely according to the location of their seats because the band wanted to ensure optimal coverage by spreading the shooters throughout the arena. On the night of the concert, the chosen audience members met before the concert to pick up their equipment and get their instructions. They were asked to start

their cameras when the Beastie Boys hit the stage and not stop shooting until the concert was over. Yauch “deliberately kept rules to a minimum because he wanted to leave plenty of room for interpretation.”⁴ After the concert, the camera people turned in their cameras and footage, and the next day, “Director Nathaniel Hornblower returned the fifty cameras to the store.”⁵

Then began the task of sifting through the enormous amount of footage generated by the fifty camera people. “They all had very different takes,” explained Yauch. “Some were very steady. Others were dancing with their cameras the whole time. Some liked to stay wide or zoom a lot – some focused on the audience. A few people shot the stage for the entire length of the concert. They just shot what they wanted to see, and that worked really well.”⁶ While this film is the first to attempt to incorporate the unique footage shot by fifty different camera people of one event, it is certainly not the first film to incorporate polyphony as a tool for more authentic representation.

Incorporating many different voices through user-generated content in documentary film seems to be the digital age’s response to Jean Rouch’s concern in the 1950’s of greater participation by the ethnographic other.⁷ Rouch’s concept of shared anthropology attempted “to replace his monologic voice of authority with more dispersed voices of authority, offering their versions of the social world around them.”⁸ Rouch attempted to involve his subjects more completely in his films by showing them footage and incorporating their responses and commentary in the film. User-generated content eliminates the middle-man by allowing subjects access to cameras and the ability to produce their own footage. This new mode of production seems to successfully “open up the ‘closed authority’ of texts – so that monologic stylistics privileging the researcher’s point of view give[s] way to greater participation by Others, whose roles as authors of much of the text have often been unacknowledged.”⁹ One of the first ways

documentarians attempted to open up the closed authority of texts was by staging dialogues or interviews where the object of study became a “speaking subject, who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back... [But] in this view, “culture” is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, *between* subjects in relations of power.”¹⁰ James Clifford argued that “polyvocality was restrained in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, “informants,” to be quoted or paraphrased.”¹¹ It became an ideal for many ethnographers to create “a polyphonic text, none of whose participants would have the final word in the form of a framing story or encompassing synthesis.”¹² But the question remains as to whether or not *Awesome...* or any text for that matter, is or can be successful at truly replacing the monologic voice of authority. James Clifford warned, “Dialogic texts are, after all, texts, merely “representations” of dialogues. The anthropologist retains his or her authority as a constituting subject and representative of the dominant culture. Dialogic texts can be just as staged and controlled as experiential or interpretive texts.”¹³

While polyphony might allow for greater authenticity by allowing the subjects of a documentary to participate in the creation of the text, *Awesome...* seems to suggest that there is a limit to the number of voices a film can contain and still be successful at giving voice to the subjects. Clifford explained of polyvocality:

If accorded an autonomous textual space, transcribed at sufficient length, indigenous statements make sense in terms different from those of the arranging ethnographer... This suggests an alternate textual strategy, a utopia of plural authorship that accords to collaborators, not merely the status of independent enunciators, but that of writers.¹⁴

The problem with the polyvocality in *Awesome...* is that it never “transcribes” any one person’s experience “at sufficient length,” and the result is that the viewer never has an understanding of any one person’s experience of the event. The film does allow for moments of identification

with individual camera people: one cameraperson videotapes his trip to the bathroom, another cameraperson buys drinks and snacks from concession stand, a pair of camera-people manage to sneak backstage, and finally, camera-people interview their friends after the concert about their opinion of the concert. Ultimately, however, each experience with a camera person provides such a fleeting glimpse of them that they remain nameless, faceless, and identified only by the small action the viewer witnessed. It could be argued that through the use of so many points of view the viewer gets a sense of the combined “experience” of the audience, but that reduce the film to an exercise in futility since it would then be attempting to represent something that in reality does not exist.

The filmmakers described the footage shot by the audience members as “highly personal and extremely passionate,”¹⁵ yet the fact that the end product of the film appears to have melded those unique and distinct experiences into one “experience” suggests the loss of the individuality of each camera person. One of the camera people, after a screening of the film, said, “with this movie you get the feeling you had while watching the show, plus what the others in different parts of the arena saw.”¹⁶ But this film does not end up with different voices, just different vantage points. The film cuts between so many different shots that the viewer gets a sense of moving among different locations in the arena, but the shots never spend enough time with the people shooting the footage to allow the audience any understanding of the camera people. It would be interesting to see the difference had Yauch chosen to use ten or twenty camera people rather than fifty. Perhaps the film would have been able to more successfully balance the unique experiences of audience members and the “experience” of the concert itself. Unfortunately, in the case of *Awesome...* the polyvocality was reduced to a cacophony.

And yet, the audience, as shown by the observation of the camera person who enjoyed the ability to see what other members of the audience saw, more readily believes the film's representation of the event because it offers different perspectives. The film has greater credibility because it incorporates multiple points of view. As Michael Renov observes, "No longer ought we as a culture to assume that the preservation and subsequent representation of historical events on film or tape can serve to stabilize meaning."¹⁷ Andrea Kilbourne of Emap described people's behavior of media consumption in today's digital age and said, "People don't really trust the view of one person anymore, but the aggregate view of many people."¹⁸ But the question remains as to how many points of view are necessary before something is considered trustworthy. It stands to reason, however, that not only the sheer number of perspectives, but the identity and quality of the perspectives, influence credibility and authenticity. For example, many teens no longer distinguish between commercial and amateur content, and place more value in content produced by their peers than produced by Hollywood.¹⁹ The fact that the fans viewing *Awesome* understand that the footage was shot by fans, gives the film an additional cache that it might not have had had it been filmed by professionals. The irony, however, is that the only way a viewer might know audience members shot the film is by the announcement of that fact at the opening of the film. Without that title card, a viewer might not realize the footage was not, in fact, professional. Perhaps not surprisingly, advertisers have recently embraced the use of user-produced content in their advertisements because there is "growing evidence that consumers are more influenced by 'word of mouth' and product recommendations of other consumers than traditional advertising."²⁰ The co-option by advertisers of user-generated content is especially ironic considering the form's originally democratic intent.

The term “user-generated content” refers to “any form of content that consumers or users of content create or produce, including video, audio, animation and text.”²¹ The creation and popularity of user-generated content has greatly increased over the past few years due in large part to the popularity of reality television shows and the growing consumer desire for “unfiltered, unvarnished content.”²² The supposed intention of user-generated content is to encourage audience members to “overcome their traditionally marginalized role vis a vis the meaning of a text and to be active participants in the production of meaning.”²³ The act of giving the camera to the subject gives the subject power over the telling of their story, but user-generated content, and *Awesome...* in particular, complicates the question of who or what could truly be labeled the “subject” of the film. It could be argued that the individual camera people are the subjects as it is their experiences the audience is meant to follow. It could also be argued that the audience as a whole is the subject especially in light of the espoused interest of the film to capture the “experience” of attending a Beastie Boys’ concert, and there are many times when the cameras capture the dancing, singing, or other antics of audience members who are not filming the event. It could also be argued that the band themselves is the subject of the film since most of the footage is focused on their performance. Finally, it could be argued that the people viewing the film are the subject since they are placed in the position of a concert audience member, asked to “experience” the concert along with those who appear on screen, and often addressed directly by different audience members through their cameras, thereby providing the ultimate complication between filmmaker, subject, and viewer. Regardless of who or what merits the distinction of subject in the film, the fact that the film incorporates user-generated content disrupts the traditional power structures of documentary film even more so than previous attempts to incorporate polyvocality.

In addition to complicating the notions of polyvocality and the identification of the subject in documentary film, the similarities between user-generated content and cinema verite raise the question of whether or not user-generated content is cinema verite in the digital age. Jeanne Hall's description of the qualities that epitomize early American cinema verite appears to fit almost exactly with the qualities of user-generated content: "the restless, wandering movements of lightweight, hand-held cameras; the blurred, grainy images of fast monochrome film; the preference for (even unintelligible) synchronous sound over authoritative voice-over narration; and the impromptu performances of apparently preoccupied social actors."²⁴ Just as with cinema verite, the audience is meant to implicitly trust the footage shot by the audience members because they do not have a "hidden agenda." They, like the audience watching the movie, simply want to enjoy the concert. The incorporation of user-generated content illustrates a desire by filmmakers for increased authenticity by using a distinctly amateur aesthetic that gives credibility among their fans. It positions them as a "force from the margins who have managed to infiltrate 'the system' and disrupt it from within."²⁵

Despite the originally democratic intention of user-generated content and its relationship to the disruptive elements of cinema verite, most often the content must be mediated by some other force. Simon Guild, the CEO of MTV Networks Europe, explained:

Even with user-generated content, there is an editorial overlay. There is some form of ranking and editorial, the choosing and organizing of material. There is some guiding hand in most of these areas that arranges content in such a way that people actually consume it. It is one thing to upload your user-generated content; it is another for everyone to see it. A pure unvarnished piece of user-generated content that sits there with no context and editorial? Yes, there will be opportunities for that, but in the long run, they will be quite limited.²⁶

Clifford echoed that sentiment and qualified his remarks about polyvocality by adding, "quotations are always staged by the quoter... a more radical polyphony would only displace

ethnographic authority, still confirming, the final, virtuoso orchestration by a single author of all discourses in his or her text.²⁷ Roland Barthes also described the impossibility of a text without one controlling narrator:

At the level of discourse, objectivity, or the absence of any clues to the narrator, turns out to be a particular form of fiction, the result of what might be called the referential illusion, where the historian tries to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself... Historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signifies it; it asserts at every moment: *this happened*, but the meaning conveyed is only that someone is making that assertion.²⁸

Awesome: I ... Shot That! provides a clear example of a text that implies sole authorship by the audience members who shot the footage and attempts to deny the influence of the editor. Adam Yauch said that the moment in the film when one of the camera people, when shooting the stage, put their hands in front of the camera to “squish” the band’s heads²⁹ epitomized what this movie was really about because a professional director of photography would never have put their hand in front of the camera like that.³⁰ That may be true in part, but it neglects the fact that an editor, in this case Yauch himself, ultimately chose whether or not to include that shot in the final cut. The fact that the editor decides what footage is selected for the film and how the footage plays within the film, argues that the democratic intent behind the decision to give power to the camera people by allowing them to shoot their own footage is negated when the power over the footage is reclaimed by the editor.

The unequal balance of power in favor of the editor is also evidenced by the extensive use of post-production effects in *Awesome...* Almost the entire second half of the film is heavily layered with post-production video effects such as the animation that was used in one shot to move into an extreme close-up of the bass. At one point slow motion cross-cutting between Mike D and an audience member highlights their similar dance moves, and the use of Photoshop effects and dizzyingly fast editing are but a few of the other effects used in the film. The

prevalence of effects implies a judgement by Yauch about the footage, and leads to one of two conclusions. One, that Yauch somehow felt he needed to assert even more of the power he lost when he gave up control of the filming, and he did so by manipulating the footage after it had been shot. Or two, in a possible commentary on user-generated content in general, he did not believe the footage as shot by the camera people was interesting enough or of high enough quality to sustain a ninety minute film. Either way, Yauch ends up in a position that is superior to that of the camera people.

However, it could be argued that the power given to the camera-people was mediated in Yauch's favor from the beginning. Yauch had potential camera-people apply for the "job" and then chose fifty of them according to the location of their seats in the arena. While the camera people were ostensibly allowed the freedom to shoot whatever they wanted, again a gesture toward cinema verite, ironically, the highly choreographed placement of the cameras feels more like footage from the three camera studio mode of live television shows in the 1950's than the intended cutting edge, three-hundred and sixty degree view of cinema verite. Admittedly, the highly structured selection of camera locations addresses the practical concern of needing to avoid having all the footage shot from one corner of the arena, but, again, it seems the limit of polyvocality has reared its ugly head. The sheer volume of cameras from which to choose and the rapid cutting between different vantage points on the same side of the one hundred and eighty degree line produces a visual experience that is more closely related to the uniform and highly structured effect of the most regressive production style and renders everyone's shots meaningless rather than unique or interesting.

In *Awesome...*, footage that at one time had a unique perspective and point of view, when combined with the footage from the other forty-nine filmmakers, turned into a ninety-minute

music video. Dizzily quick cuts and the extensive use of post-production visual effects tend to connect the film more closely with music videos than more well-known concert documentaries such as *Don't Look Back* or *Gimme Shelter*. That close relationship to music videos creates another inherent contradiction between the democratic intent of user-generated content and the traditional function of music videos, which is to increase the sales of CDs, or in this case, DVDs and future concert ticket sales. The film also borrows from music videos in the creation of its soundtrack. The professionally recorded music created by the band onstage provides the overriding organizing principle for the visuals, and only a few moments in the film include sound created by the audience members. That use of a single soundtrack, produced by the filmmaker, to which the visuals conform, is yet another way the filmmaker's role ultimately trumps that of the camera people; one more way the subjects lose agency.

The extensive pre-production, fast paced editing, use of post-production visuals, and use of the soundtrack to organize the visuals all reduce this progressive fan activity of user-generated content to the monolithic gaze of the director/editor. The reclamation of power by the band is taken one step further by the film's mode of distribution. While most user-generated content is distributed via the internet where fans can further interact with the material by downloading and re-editing or re-mixing the content, then reposting it in an endless cycle of production, reclamation, and distribution, this film was distributed in movie theaters and on DVD where the interaction is highly structured and limited by its format.

The Beastie Boys' posturing in both the creation of *Awesome...* and on their website, seems to be a case of what John Caldwell called "showcased self-effacement [which] can deny the integral role of presence of the filmmaker."³¹ Their denial of the presence of the filmmaker even went as far as Yauch's use of a well-known pseudonym, Nathaniel Hornblower, in lieu of

his own name as director. Pierre Bourdieu questions the politics of culture and is “particularly attentive to strategies of cultural power that advance through denying their attachment to immediate political ends and thereby accumulate both symbolic capital and “high” structural position.”³² This suggests that the posturing by the Beastie Boys as endorsing fan involvement in the production of their media ingratiate them to their fans while earning the band a cache among members of the entertainment industry for their innovative means of reappropriating the renegade fan activity of user-generated content. Whether this was the conscious intention of the band or not, what appears to be their relinquishing of power is actually a means of accumulating more power. Perhaps Yauch simply took the advice of Scot Gensler, head of business development at Grouper Network, a user-generated video site recently acquired by Sony Pictures, who said, “Users will (make videos) anyway. Get in the game and love these people.”³³

In this case of a text where the question of subject is complicated to the point of unanswerable, and the power of creating the text itself is shared by different parties, the text’s perspective and argument are nearly impossible to pin down. Namely, whose perspective and argument does the film convey? Bill Nichols said, “Perspective is the way in which a documentary text offers a particular point of view through its depiction of the world. It leads us to infer a tacit argument.”³⁴ In the case of *Awesome..*, the perspective as advertised is that of the audience members who shot the footage, but ultimately, the perspective seems to be that of Adam Yauch. This has both to do with the fact that it is practically impossible to articulate fifty distinct points of view in ninety minutes, and the fact that it is also practically impossible to articulate one cohesive perspective from fifty distinct points of view. In either case, the perspective of the director/editor is paramount. Yauch clearly chose what footage to show when, for how long, and in what order. However, it is still not the case that the perspective is entirely

that of the director/editor because of the incorporation and highlighting of user-generated content. That fact moves the perspective away from the editor and returns it at least in part to that of the camera people and the filmmaker's original intention for the film, which was to capture the experience of the audience at a Beastie Boys' concert. In yet another mind-bending twist, it could also be argued that ultimately the perspective seems not to be a perspective on the actual concert or the experience of the concert at all, but a more reflexive perspective on the creation of media itself.

The fact that this film and the incorporation of polyphony through user-generated content raises questions about such basic and fundamental categories as perspective and argument, necessarily leads to a consideration of the applicability of other basic categories that have traditionally been used in the study of documentary films to this new format. The first category to consider is that of Bill Nichols and Vivian Sobchack's *Documentary Gazes* (the accidental, the helpless, the endangered, the interventional, the humane, and the clinical or professional gazes).³⁵ Nichols and Sobchack argue that the image provides insight into its user's "ethical, political, and ideological stance as well as an imprint of the visible surface of things."³⁶ Nichols argues that the discussion of these gazes usually falls under a discussion of style which itself is a bearer of meaning and communicates a moral point of view.³⁷ The main point of contention between Nichols and Sobchack's documentary gazes and user-generated content, is Nichols and Sobchack's assumption that there exists one filmmaker who controls the creation of the content and later edits the footage. When documentary films incorporate user-generated content, the creators of the content and the editors are usually, if not always, different people who may or may not have different agendas. In the case of documentary films that incorporate user-generated content, it seems necessary to identify the gaze of the camera person (which is also

complicated because more often than not in user-generated content, the camera person is the subject of their own footage) as distinct from the gaze of the editor. While the camera person gazes directly upon the subject through the camera, the editor is one step removed because they have to gaze at the subject through the camera person. This conundrum calls into question whether or not the ethical stance implied by the gaze as the audience sees it, is the ethical stance of the camera person toward the subject or the editor's ethical stance toward either the camera person, the subject, or both.

In the case of *Awesome...*, the gazes of the camera people appear accidental. The footage fits the characteristics of accidental footage as described by Nichols: characterized by chaotic framing, blurred focus, poor sound quality, the sudden use of a zoom lens, jerky camera movements, the inability to foreshadow or pursue the most pivotal events, and a subject-camera distance that may seem too distant or too close on either aesthetic or informational grounds.³⁸ But even that categorization is troubled by the fact that in this case, as is largely the case in user-generated content, the distance between subject and camera is neither too distant nor too close, but, rather, does not exist at all. The very fact that it is user-generated content equates the subject with the camera. The audience is supposed to believe that what they see on the screen is what the subject sees. The audience sees through the eyes/camera of the subject, and even with the occasional exception of moments when the subject/camera person turns the camera on themselves and speaks directly into the camera, the audience assumes the camera and subject are one and the same since the subject is still filming themselves.

As for the editor's gaze in *Awesome...*, it could best be categorized as clinical or professional. Yauch is certainly detached, and has no problem jumping from one person's footage to another, but his compulsion to manipulate the footage through the use of post-

production effects suggests an attempt to imprint his own emotional response to the footage onto the film. His role as editor could also be considered interventional since he has the power to editorially intervene in what is shown to the audience and thereby mediate the experience of the audience members. One camera person videotaped their excursion to the men's room, and while this was certainly not a life threatening or dangerous situation by any means, it could be considered objectionable footage, and the editor clearly had a choice whether or not to intervene and stop the action by cutting to something else. He chose, however, to allow the scene to play out from the moment the young man walks into the bathroom, through the washing of his hands. While the editor clearly could not have intervened and stopped the actual trip to the bathroom from happening, he could have intervened and stopped the audience from experiencing it.

The second category that is integral to the study of documentary film and therefore deserves reconsideration in light of this new format, is Bill Nichols's *Modes of Documentary Representation*. In his work, Bill Nichols defined four modes of documentary representation that he said, "stand out as the dominant organizational patterns around which most texts are structured."³⁹ They are the expository mode, the observational mode, the interactive mode, and the reflexive mode.⁴⁰ The expository mode does not fit very well with *Awesome...* or user-generated content in general, especially because in the expository mode the task of the witness is to contribute evidence to someone else's argument and the audience's attention is not on "how the filmmaker *uses* witnesses to make a point but on the effectiveness of the argument itself."⁴¹ It is possible to view the footage generated by user-generated content as evidence that contributes to someone else's argument, but the expository mode seems to call for a more clinical approach than that afforded by the more personal footage produced by user-generated content; and with user-generated content, the audience seems to be totally aware of the function

of the witness within the film. Finally, films that incorporate user-generated content typically do not use the voice over narration or intertitles that typify the expository mode.

Awesome... does, however, fit with many of the characteristics of the observational mode. It covers one moment exhaustively and each cut or edit “serves mainly to sustain the spatial and temporal continuity of observation rather than the logical continuity of an argument or case.”⁴² It also places the camera “on the scene” which suggests a “commitment or engagement with the immediate, intimate, and personal that is comparable to what an actual observer/participant might experience. The sounds and images are recorded at the moment of observational filming, in contrast to the voice-over and images of illustration in the expository mode.”⁴³ The observational mode “affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others.”⁴⁴ This mode, more than any of the others seems to describe user-generated content, but is also fundamentally complicated by the fact that the very action of observation does not occur in the conventional sense in user-generated content. Typically, the filmmaker observes the subject. In user-generated content, the subject is usually the camera person, which revisits the earlier discussion of the role of subject, camera person, editor, and audience. The role of the editor might be considered observational since they are the ones who ultimately observe the footage as shot by the camera people and appear unobtrusive to the events that unfold before the camera. The question remains: if it is observational, who observes whom?

Awesome... also contains elements of the interactive mode. In the interactive mode, the “editing operates to maintain a logical continuity between individual viewpoints, usually without benefit of overarching commentary.”⁴⁵ In *Awesome...* the editor clearly played the role of maintaining a logic between the fifty different points of view, and it lacked an overarching

commentary (unless the soundtrack is considered an overarching commentary). It also incorporates unusual framing and strange juxtaposition. Those two qualities seem inherent in user-generated content. However, the interactive mode is typically characterized by the use of interviews, and in user-generated content, the relationship seems not to be the filmmaker interacting with the social actor, but between the camera person and the editor. It is possible to consider the relationship between the camera person and the editor as that of an interviewee to an interviewer respectively. Especially in light of the fact that interviews “are a form of hierarchical discourse deriving from the unequal distribution of power, as in the confessional and the interrogation.”⁴⁶ The interviewer holds more power than the interviewee just as it could be argued that the editor holds more power in the final film than the camera person. On the other hand, it could be just as easily argued that the camera person actually holds more power as they are the ones who produce the footage from which the editor must work.

Awesome..., and user-generated content in general, also contain elements of the reflexive mode. When incorporating user-generated content, there is an awareness of the method of production. The use of user-generated content is one of the big selling points for *Awesome...*, and the press kit for the film focused almost exclusively on the method of production. That self-consciousness “not only about form and style, but also about strategy, structure, conventions, expectations, and effects,” is a key element in the reflexive mode.⁴⁷ The film begins by showing the camera people in a room, receiving their equipment and instructions, and then ends by showing the camera people waiting to return their equipment after the show. The problem with equating user-generated content too closely with the reflexive mode though is that typically the reflexivity of a documentary film has served to question the ability of the film to truly represent a person, place or thing, but in the case of user-generated content, the reflexivity seems to work in

the opposite way. The fact that the subjects have control of the camera lends further credence and trustworthiness to that which is being represented, and rather than causing the audience to question what they see on the screen, it creates an attitude in the audience where they will believe almost anything they see or hear (hence the popularity of user-generated content, and, ironically, fictionally created user-generated content in advertising).

Nichols coined the terms used to describe these four categories, but “the practices they refer to are filmmaking practices that filmmakers themselves recognize as distinctive approaches to the representation of reality.”⁴⁸ Since the introduction of user-generated content has changed filmmaking practices in a radical way, Nichols himself would seem to agree that the four categories need reconsideration. As the format is relatively new and its use has yet to become pervasive in documentary film, it will be interesting to watch its influence on the medium in future. It would also be invaluable to watch documentaries that incorporate user-generated content in different ways and bring them into the discussion. Whereas *Awesome...* used the footage produced by fifty different camera people, films such as *Chain Camera* used footage provided by approximately twenty camera people and *The War Tapes* incorporated footage shot by three different camera people. In light of the possible limits of the effectiveness of polyphony, it would be of great use to study the polyvocality in those two films as compared to *Awesome...* Those films would also allow for further investigation of the politics of power in user-generated content in documentary films, and possibly help to answer the question of whether not the democratic intent of user-generated content is negated by the preproduction and ultimate reappropriation of the footage by the director/editor. It would also be interesting to consider the documentary gazes and modes of documentary representation in those two films as compared to *Awesome....*

Clearly the use of polyphony through user-generated content in documentary film is a complicated one, which deserves more study as the implications of this technology seem to be shifting the way documentary films are produced and consumed. *Awesome: I ...Shot That* was one of the first films to attempt to incorporate polyvocality through user-generated content in a real way, and while the effectiveness of its end product is certainly debatable, its innovation is commendable. Perhaps it is inevitable that everyone “get in the game and love these people.”

¹ *Awesome: I ... Shot That!* Press Release. Revolver Entertainment, 2006.
<http://www.revolvergroup.com/beastieboys_awesome/press/beasties_press_release4_low.pdf>.
17 November 2006. 3.

² *Ibid.* 5.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* 6.

⁵ Whether true or not, this statement by the band which appears on their website (a site for fans) rather than in the press release (for professionals), seems to point to the later discussion of their attempt to eschew their role as those in power and to further ingratiate them with their fans.
www.beastieboismovie.com

⁶ *Awesome: I ...Shot That!* Press Release. 6.

⁷ Scheinman, Diane. “The ‘Dialogic Imagination’ of Jean Rouch: Covert Conversations in *Les maitres fous*.” *Documenting the Documentary*. Grant, Barry Keith and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998: 192.

⁸ *Ibid.* 194.

⁹ *Ibid.* 188.

¹⁰ Clifford, James, “Partial Truths.” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986: 14-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 15.

¹² Tyler, Stephen A. “Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document.” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986: 126.

¹³ Rabinow, Paul. “Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology.” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986: 246.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 246.

¹⁵ *Awesome: I ...Shot That!* Press Release. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 7.

¹⁷ Renov, Michael. *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge, 1993. 8.

¹⁸ “Mobile Entertainment: Users in Control.” *New Media Age*. 25 May 2006: 32.

-
- ¹⁹ Donaton, Scott. "How to Thrive in New World of User-Created Content: Let Go." *Advertising Age*. 1 May 2006: 38.
- ²⁰ "User-Generated Content: Its Rise from Supporting to Starring Role: How It's Transforming Entertainment, Information and News." Rider Research, 2006. 7.
- ²¹ *Ibid.* 4.
- ²² *Ibid.* 5.
- ²³ Lagerwey, Jorie. "'Jackass' For President: Revitalizing an American Public Life Through the Aesthetic of the Amateur." *Spectator – The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television* 24.1 (Spring 2004). 93.
- ²⁴ Hall, Jeanne. "'Don't You Ever Just Watch?' American Cinema Verite and *Don't Look Back*." *Documenting the Documentary*. Grant, Barry Keith and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998: 224.
- ²⁵ Lagerwey, Jorie. 87.
- ²⁶ "Executive Q&A: MTV's New Platform Opportunities." *Inside Digital TV* 9.18 (2006).
- ²⁷ Rabinow, Paul. 246.
- ²⁸ Renov, Michael. 27.
- ²⁹ This is a reference to a skit from the television show, *Kids in the Hall*.
- ³⁰ DVD Commentary. *Awesome: I ... Shot That!* Dir. Nathaniel Hornblower. Perf. Beastie Boys. Think Film, 2006.
- ³¹ Caldwell, John T. "Representation and Complicity in Suburban Migrant Camps: Reflections of a Documentary Filmmaker." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 28.2 (Fall 2003). 216.
- ³² Rabinow, Paul. 252.
- ³³ Woodson, Alex. "Time to Embrace User-Generated Content." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 15 September 2006.
- ³⁴ Nichols, Bill. Representing Reality. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 118.
- ³⁵ Bill Nichols and Vivian Sobchack's Documentary Gazes:
1. The accidental gaze: when the camera happens upon something accidentally. This gaze evokes curiosity in the viewer.
 2. The helpless gaze: The filmmaker can see and record but cannot act or intervene. This gaze evokes sympathy in the viewer.
 3. The endangered gaze: the footage shows the filmmaker or cameraperson at personal risk. This gaze imbues the cameraperson with courage and thereby stresses the audience's relationship to the camera and filmmaker.
 4. The interventional gaze: the filmmaker intervenes in a situation where they believe the subject to be more immediately endangered than themselves. This gaze is aligned with the interactive mode of documentary representation.
 5. The humane gaze: emphasizes the human agency behind the camera, but the humane gaze occurs in a situation where intervention would not help the situation.
 6. The clinical or professional gaze: the film situates itself within the ambivalent space between detached recording and humane response. The professional seeks out what others stumble upon but chooses to signal neither helplessness nor empathy (Nichols 82-87).
- ³⁶ Nichols, Bill. 79.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.* 79-80.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* 82.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 32.

⁴⁰ Nichols' Modes of Documentary Representation:

1. The expository mode: addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical world.

2. The observational mode: stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker. Such films cede "control" over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode.

3. The interactive mode: the comments and responses of the social actors provide a central part of the film's argument. Various forms of monologue and dialogue predominate.

4. The reflexive mode: the audience sees the filmmaker engaging in metacommentary, speaking to the audience less about the historical world itself, as in the expository and poetic or interactive and diaristic modes, than about the process of representation itself.

The reflexive mode addresses the question of *how* we talk about the historical world.

(Nichols 34-57).

⁴¹ Nichols, Bill. 37.

⁴² *Ibid.* 40.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 47.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 32.