

Pandemic Documentary: Negotiating “Cramped Space”

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In developing a comparative and dynamic dialogue on “pandemic documentary” as part of a conference at the University of Nottingham, UK, in June 2023—at a point when the COVID-19 public health crisis was becoming a memory for many as everyday life (without restrictions) was being resumed—the issue of “resources” as materials, objects, techniques, etc. surfaced as a key point of interest. Specific case studies focused on the use of bricolage, colour, comedy, conspiracy theories, and creative writing, as well as sustainable filming methods and graphic governance.

The backdrop to these documentary responses was understood in terms of two dominant tensions of the COVID-19 pandemic: the ongoing omniscient “virus centric” perspective of public health initiatives seeking to navigate the “catastrophic” and “non-catastrophic” (Doshi 532, 534); the agitation and irritability resulting from a tension between “entrapment” and the need for “escape” (aka “cabin fever” [Crawford and Crawford 4]).

The work of Deleuze and Guattari on “cramped space” in “minor literature” is helpful here in positioning these tensions as immediately political (17). This is particularly the case when considering alternatives to “confinement” as an all-encompassing experience, i.e. something that feels permanent and framed by the Other, rather than something that is temporarily upon us. The issue of “resources” within Deleuze and Guattari’s “cramped space” is made clear by Walters and Lúthi, who write that “Cramped space [...] forces its subjects to be creative and experimental, to pursue politics at the limit and fashion lives with whatever materials, languages and identities they find close at hand. No ready-made trajectories are available under cramped conditions, and non-linear mobility is part of the experience” (362).

Despite restrictions on physical movement and collective gathering during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant escalation in political protest and polarisation driven by the worsening of social conditions and inequalities (van der Zwet et al.). Documentary film is a rich source of alternative and marginalised narratives that allow us to reflect beyond the limits of a positivistic/omniscient perspective; increasingly, it is shaped by digital developments that enable more flexible and non-standard filmmaking formats (Kim, “Data”). With this in mind, how do experiences and representations of “cramped space” allow documentary filmmakers and documentary participants (including the spectator) to frame and reframe pandemic times, and to articulate the contrasting individual and collective crises occurring therein?

These questions seek to encourage discussion of practices beyond the notable techniques of vlogging, drone imagery, and data visualisations of the COVID-19 pandemic period and to dig deeper into the proliferation of film practices on social and digital platforms termed “expanded documentary” (Kim, *Documentary's Expanded Fields*).

Reflecting on the “mobility” of documentary film practices in physical and genre terms, some of the questions we have considered in preparing for this special issue are as follows:

- How did “documentary” create “space” during the period of physical restriction imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic? In what small ways did “documentary” (similarly to “minor literature”) open a space for the political individual and collective? What does a comparative lens offer us when reflecting upon different communities and nations? What role was played by time, history, and memory?
- How were the essential resources of “documentary” deployed in shaping the experience of the COVID-19 “pandemic”, and specifically in representing and resisting the feeling of being “cramped”? How were these resources deployed beyond the filmic? Are there any perspectives offering us new insights into the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How does a focus on “resources” allow us to develop a broader notion of “pandemic documentary”? In turn, how does this allow us to deal with a contraction in space and sense of being “cramped” (particularly in response to the rampant and overbearing nature of pandemics)?

The focus of this special issue is not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic, although we acknowledge its recency and ongoing impact—other areas of related interest could include attention to HIV/AIDS, influenza, tuberculosis, and “modern plagues” (environmental pollution, inequalities, discrimination).

In general terms, this special issue aims to consider how “pandemic documentary” deals with “cramped space” and the various responses that may emerge in representational terms. Possible topics could include but are not limited to:

- spatiality of contagion and threat
- representing the “invisible”, both contagion and those outside of the systems of public health identification and control (e.g. homeless people, undocumented migrants)
- cultural citizenship
- sustainability, bricolage, and DIY filmmaking
- the intermedial and intertextual
- historicity, memory, and time
- contextual and cultural differences in representing pandemics and public health
- participation, employment, and work
- care giving, corporate “carewashing”
- disinformation and catastrophising
- healthy confinements
- inequalities surrounding class, gender, and/or race
- marginalisation and exclusion
- agency, identity, and difference
- queering pandemics

We are seeking submissions corresponding to the following formats:

Full length article, 5,500–7,000 words

Video essay with accompanying reflective/explicatory text, 500–1000 words

Reports, reviews, reflections, interviews and other short texts, 1,500–2,500 words

Full publications guidelines for consultation:

<https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Guidelines.html>

300-word abstract submission date: 30 June 2024 (response by 31 July 2024)

Please make contact with us if you have any questions:

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