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## Election Day – Documentary

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Election Day — Documentary

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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Lyon College  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2010

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council

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## ABSTRACT

Election Day is a three-channel documentary chronicling the places, personalities, and tone of Little Rock, Arkansas, during its titular midterm Election Day in November 2018. Throughout the course of the day, the film branches across the city, capturing mini-narratives, bits of conversation, and tableau of civic activity in the public sphere. It is less concerned with the quantitative facts of the day as it is with conveying the transitory social expressions and moods of a modern, southern city on a uniquely American day. This project represents my continued documentary interest in creating inclusive, contemporary local portraits and counter-historical chronicles of Arkansas's capitol city in light of the current political moment.

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## INTRODUCTION

While working on this thesis, trying to situate the work in some historical continuum and theoretical context, I turned to videos of conversations with some of the contemporary filmmakers I admire, whose work I encountered during my time in this program, and whose approaches to non-fiction film and video resonated with me during the process of getting outside of my comfort zone to build out *Election Day*.

Deborah Stratman's 11-part essay film *The Illinois Parables* (2016) conjured the political, geographic and archeological time of her home state, finding longer threads of power, myth and domination that span from pre-Columbians in 600 BC to the assassination of Fred Hampton in 1969. Her land- and time-based images filmed in the present offer open, durational portals—a duration of time is, to be certain, timeless—to the real and lived ancient and historical past. One of the unique attributes of film, Stratman says, is that “it gives you a reprieve from your own temporal habits, to let go of a contract you have with yourself and step in someone else's time sculpture for a little bit” (IU Cinema).

RaMell Ross' *Hale County This Morning This Evening* (2018), too, is a place-specific time sculpture of a film that documents life as lived in the shadow of the historical South. Its layers of historical reference and contemporary significance are approached indirectly, from an oblique angle, social reality built into an impressionistic, poetic assemblage. Ross interrogates race, representation and identity through a free-poetical film language all his own, “using time to figure out how we've come to be seen” (0:29). His portraiture is outright cosmic: textured, metaphysical images of Black folk that gracefully but forcefully refute the dominant historical imagery of African Americans carved through the span of America's visual history. His film is deeply humanistic and phenomenological, with a kinetic, heightened realism creating the

majestic and epic out of the mundane. Its documentary mode is both observational and reflexive (Nichols) and the meaning-making implicit in Ross's gaze-correcting work requires an active critical audience engagement with race, the politics of the image, the historical abuses of the power of image, and the intersections of politics and Black images to create the legacies of bleak inequality in the historical South. His anti-narrative captures the psychological discharge and energy that gets lost in the consequences of cold histories and systematic facts but exploited in the marketplace of images. "If we think about the [frame] as a site of extreme complexity in a singular instance of meaning," Ross says of his visual enunciation during a May 2019 Sundance Institute conversation, "How do you use a background of looking deeply at things...as the site of meaning in the context of time and space and extended periods?"

John Akomfrah, a contemporary master of non-fiction film and video art, stands as one of the architects of this mode of philosophical, discursive documentary that evokes alternative historical narrative by deconstructing the power and history of the image. While his documentary practice and film activism stretch back to his agit-prop work with the Black Audio Film Collective—the aggressive, subversive and monumental *Handsworth Songs* (1986) about riots in inner-city Birmingham, UK—his recent multi-frame works like *Purple* (2017) and *Vertigo Sea* (2015) are "imagined across a broad terrestrial and psychic prospect" (Bourland 131). These two contemporary films utilize present-tense and archival image in a narrative dialectic propelled between theory (Marxist), form (referential), and content (political). Akomfrah's work represents documentary film as "a way of 'doing history, a form of visual genealogy...in which fixed temporal or spatial narratives are no longer adequate" (Bourland 128).

Akomfrah, in conversation with media curator Rudolf Freling:

*Freling: You have a series of tableaux that punctuate the three-channel installation and introduce a different sense of time...what do those tableaux do for you?*

*Akomfrah: Lots of things, some of it I can explain. One of the weird things about making things like this is you work so hard to get things to reach a kind of state of wordlessness [laughs] and then, as soon as you finish, you...get asked to explain it all. And I can explain some, but some of it will have to remain enigmatic because they're kind of post-language in a way. (SFMOMA)*

Documentary portraits of Little Rock have been similarly present-tense accounts of the city existing in the shadows of its own visual history. Little Rock Central High School and the city's civil rights legacy have dominated the course of documentary and non-fiction films about the city. Charles Guggenheim, who filmed the integration of St. Louis schools for *A City Decides* (1954), would go on to win an Academy Award for *Nine From Little Rock* (1964), a scripted/performed educational film starring one of the Little Rock Nine, Jefferson Thomas, recounting his story while walking the grounds of the school. Twenty years after integration, WTTW of Chicago documented the 1977 senior class of Little Rock Central High School with an installment in the station's 26-part series on school desegregation, *As We See It*. That episode was singled out and recognized for a Peabody Award in 1979. In 2007, Brent and Craig Renaud, Central High alumni, released *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later* on HBO; local CBS affiliate KTHV noted the anniversary as well with *50 Years: Central High Foundations of Freedom*, an hour-long, Murrow Award-winning piece. The provocative 1994 documentary *Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock* unfolds blocks away from the Arkansas Governor's Mansion and Little Rock Central High and found a national audience during Clinton's first term. Most recently, Sonia Lowman's *Teach Them All* evokes Central High and upbraids Arkansas specifically for the bleak discrepancy between current realities and historical legacies of educational equity in its schools. But after half a century of retelling and examining stories rooted in the history-book facts of the city, something like a deeply-observed (Ross), post-language (Akomfrah), time sculpture portrait (Stratman) of this complicated American city is in order.

My documentary practice sprung from the desire to capture what Henri Cartier-Bresson identified as *the decisive moment*. This determination (and challenge) to “seize, in the confines of one single photograph, the whole essence of some situation in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes,” for Cartier-Bresson, referred to the moment his camera’s shutter snapped. I decided to take up documentary in reaction to Donald Trump being elected president—America’s own, long-festering decisive moment in November 2016—as Little Rock’s two massive contributions to post-war America had just been repudiated with his victory: Making America Great Again was the manifestation of weaponized sexism against Hillary Clinton, accumulated spite against Bill Clinton, and its backwards trajectory implied rewinding past the sacrosanct American lessons from Central High. I felt that “the whole essence of some situation in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes” on a national scale could be “seized” upon in Little Rock, so I set out to document the city’s left, liberal and progressive conversations during a time of high political anxiety and volatile transition of power, seeing their ideological isolation in the middle of a hard-right state as a frame for American political division at large.

*Election Day* takes a cue from New Historicism to document “eccentric anecdotes and enigmatic fragments as the basis for constructing counter-histories that interrupt the homogenizing forces of previous grand historical narratives” (Baron 13). Here, the transient, personal moment taken from the ground-up is the site of historical meaning instead of a journalistic top-down recounting of the quantifiable results of the day: the public sphere, the voter and volunteer, not the politician, is the emphasis. The form of this documentary, told in a horizontal triptych of video and mixed, mostly-diegetic sound, disrupts expectations of political media as a conversation restricted to one frame; the multi-frame expresses visual thinking as a communal-we instead of the egotistic-I of a single perspective frame. The multiscreen

presentation may be untraditional, but it historically rooted as an intuitive film language ready to be revitalized and democratized in a digital era. It is an attempt to unroot experience from narrative, reposition the present back into a historical process, and convey the diverse interiority of a major Southern city in an American moment where facts are optional, discord is weaponized, and as we're finding out during the writing of this thesis, the worst was just about to come.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### MULTISCREENS AND POLYVISIONS

Film history was key to understanding the uses and development of multiscreen framing, and this project quickly found its roots in the earliest years of cinema. Because editing is fundamental to filmmaking, we have to touch a few moments from the embryonic years of film history starting in 1898. As cinema was evolving out of its novelty period and in need of what would come to be called film grammar, filmmakers trying to tell a narrative story (instead of *actualites*, non-fiction precursors to documentary or 60-second bits of theater performed for the camera) found themselves in urgent need of a way to convey parallel events happening at once in two different places. British filmmaker G.A. Smith made *Santa Claus* in 1898, notable for being the first Christmas movie as well as the first example of parallel action told in film language. Here, as two children are sleeping, a circular inset is superimposed in the upper right corner of the frame, showing Santa Claus walking across the roof and going down the chimney. Multiple frames, created by double exposure (Brooke), convey simultaneous action from two different settings: one, the bedroom in the square frame and two, Santa Claus on the roof in an iris-masked circular inset within the frame. This represents cinema's first instinct on how to show two places at once before crosscutting and parallel editing. (Salt 38)

There is a slight but essential distinction between crosscutting and parallel editing. Film theorist David Bordwell distinguishes the two by their relationships to time and simultaneity. "If temporal simultaneity is not pertinent to the series, the cutting may be *parallel editing*; if the series are to be taken as temporally simultaneous, then we have *crosscutting*." Crosscutting is a means, tool, or technique for doing specific narrative work and, by virtue of its form—third point-of-view knowing where and when to take the story— the film "reveals its narration to be

omniscient” and I would add, omnipresent. (48) Crosscutting was used, but not ubiquitously, during the first decade of the 1900s. Edwin Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), D.W. Griffith’s *A Corner in Wheat* (1906) and *The 100-to-One Shot* from Vitagraph (1906) are popular examples of simultaneity being conveyed through contrasting shots in sequential order. Crosscutting juxtaposes two or more scenes sequentially to convey simultaneous time but also allows for time between relevant simultaneous sequences to be shortened and abridged. Film theorist Kristin Thompson adds that “as crosscutting became more common, this ability to shorten plot duration remained one of its most important functions.” (210-11)

Abel Gance’s *La Roue*, released in December 1922 at the peak of French Expressionism, is full of optical, in-camera tricks, revolutionary lighting and an audacious depth of field but is monumental for its contribution to pushing the limits of montage. The seven-hour epic melodrama found new kinetic editing possibilities by trimming shots down to seven, six, or even one frame. The monumental film found Gance employing “rhythmic, accelerated editing to portray extreme states of mind” (Thompson & Lee). Gance’s formal innovations meet Bordwell and Thompson’s standards and functions for crosscutting. Take the famous hijacked train scene, in which frenzied shots between smokestack, train tracks, a maxed-out tachometer gauge, Norma helpless in a train car, and a mad, lovesick engineer—these shots are crosscutting while also compressing time between events (the tunnel, the stop signal, the drunken fireman in the train’s boiler room coming to the rescue). Here, to convey simultaneity, Gance has to push the limits of editing down to the single frame.

An apocryphal story attributed to Gance has a dream team of Soviet montage innovators—Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dovzhenko and the lesser-known Nicholai Ekk—telling Gance how fundamental *La Roue* was to them. “All the great directors

came to Paris at about the same time and all of them told me that they had learned their craft by studying *La Roue* at the Moscow Academy,” said Gance. “That gave me a great deal of pleasure.” (qtd. in Brownlow “Parade” 541) *La Roue* is probably the standard example of the power of two—metric and rhythmic—of Eisenstein’s five *methods of montage*: metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtone, and intellectual. (72-83) *La Roue* predated Eisenstein’s first feature *Strike!* by two years and its kinetic influence can be felt throughout that film and soviet montage as a whole.

Five years later, Abel Gance released the follow-up up the film that inspired Jean Cocteau to declare, “there is cinema before and after *La Roue* as there is painting before and after Picasso” (qtd. in Lee) with *Napoleon*. *Napoleon* is an excessive work by a maximalist director working in grand narrative. The film production consumed 400,000 meters, or 290 hours, of film stock. In scale and technological vision, it was arguably the greatest cinematic accomplishment of its time and likely the greatest silent epic in a period marked by its silent epics. The longest completed version of the film—the no-longer existing definitive version—ran in excess of nine hours and forty minutes (Cuff 23).

*Napoleon* frequently conveys simultaneity by superimposing two or more images over each other in the single frame. But during select, heightened sequences, Gance’s formal and exhibitional technique of Polyvision expands the single screen into the center of a horizontal, three-screened triptych of film. To Gance, his Polyvision represents the fullest expression of film. To let him explain it in his own words: “The age of the split screen has come! ... The borders of time and space will be erased by the possibilities of a polymorph screen that add, split or multiply the images” (qtd. in Wahlberg).

We see an exact example of this split screen twenty minutes into *Napoleon* (the five and a half-hour 2000 Brownlow restoration) when a pillow fight breaks out the night after a contentious and consequential, and appropriately cinematically epic, snowball fight. Here, the screen is squared and *split* into four quadrants before being cubed and multiplied into nine images. A startling and heady innovation in film form, no doubt, but ultimately in *Napoleon* it is an aesthetic prophecy of what is to come bookended onto the opposite end of the movie. As Napoleon leads an army that is depleted of both strength and supplies to what surely would be a death march against the Italian Army, the film then, in Gance's words:

*"The broad panorama will now give way to separate action on each of the three screens, making possible extraordinary juxtapositions of images. Every symbol becomes palpable. The cinema enters a new era; from the melodic, it becomes the symphonic."* (qtd. in Boorsin)

At this moment, the curtains draw back from the single frame and two screens on either side synchronize as Gance's Polyvision expands to a cinematic triptych that serves as the heart and final payoff of the demanding epic. Throughout this sequence, the three frames that make up the Polyframe triptych work together in three discrete ways. One, Gance would synchronize the three frames to show panorama of armies, landscapes and vistas in extreme long shot or conversely, interior and deep-focus portraiture of Napoleon. However, as Brownlow notes, "a simple panoramic vision was not the sole aim of Gance's device. He wanted to extend the emotional and psychological range of montage and compare and contrast images across the three screens" (132). To these ends, Gance would, as in classic triptych, provide the salient information in the center screen which would be supported visually by the right and left wings; or juxtapose three different frames altogether.

Upon its release, the film Gance envisioned as something "both populist and radical, uniting avant-garde experimentation with commercial appeal" (Cuff 95) wouldn't come to full

fruition. Gance's hopes for Polyvision's revolutionary future beyond *Napoleon* would be dashed by the sheer economics of it. For one, Gaumont-Metro-Goldwyn was leveraged by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to recoup the record-breaking, four-million dollar budget of Fred Niblo's *Ben Hur*. Although they also had stake in *Napoleon*, Gance's film only represented a \$75,000 investment in comparison. Also in 1928, movie theaters were already financially compelled to install stereo systems to accommodate the fast-approaching talking pictures that were backed by the full weight of the studio system. The labor-intensive, three-projector technique required of Polyvision was hardly a priority or wise investment (Brownlow 20). Simply, there was more innovation and genius happening all at once than the film industry could support. Any potential economic impact of *Napoleon* was dashed by its expense, its delicacy, and a confluence of historical-technical bad luck. Meanwhile, Gance's earlier admirer, Eisenstein, continued with an equally eccentric passion to push the limits of what was possible with the frame. Both visionaries would tell stories dependent on conveying simultaneous action, but Eisenstein's theories of montage—crosscutting as played out sequentially in one frame—would become emblematic of the course of film history, certainly more than Gance's spatial montage playing out over three frames.

If Gance's excess speaks to the film economy of France, Eisenstein's Russia, perhaps, is what kept Eisenstein working within the confines of the single frame. Michael Betancourt offers a materialist perspective on montage, Eisenstein, and parallel editing. "The temporal organization of montage theory is a direct reflection of the available technology of the time [and] the particular structure of montage commonly employed in Soviet films reflects this technical limitation," he writes, singling out the impracticality and expense of optical printing and

compositing that lasted until 1929—two years after Gance’s *Napoleon* was completed (7). But perhaps some of Eisenstein’s key writings still apply to a more indulgent Polyvisual technique?

In one of his most frenzied passages from his essay “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” Eisenstein explains montage as conflict between elements of the same frame as well as between the elements of successive shots. What is notable here is how he conveys the multiplicities of meaning-making in these two types of montage—internal and reactive—and how it creates exponentially. One of the most-quoted excerpts from this essay shows how excitable Eisenstein was over discovering how consequential even the rudiments of this mass-scale psychical machinery could be:

*“Conflict within the shot is potential montage, in the development of its intensity shattering the quadrilateral cage of the shot and exploding its conflict into montage impulses between the montage pieces. As, in a zigzag of mimicry, the mise-en-scene splashes out into a spatial zigzag with the same shattering”* (38)

Eisenstein evokes exponential extension and expansion of the screen, conflicts emerging in different permutations among different pieces of the montage, a fractalizing of meaning-making through that dialectical process. In “The Filmic Fourth Dimension,” Eisenstein speaks of the “montage effect...of two shots side by side producing one or another conflicting interrelation, resulting in one or another expressive effect” (63). He identifies these effects as *overtone montage*, the visual equivalent of a musical overtone produced by a confluence of interrelating, individual vibrations, which go to produce this filmic fourth dimension. “Thus the quality of the totals can be placed side-by-side in any conflicting combination,” he continues, “thereby revealing entirely new possibilities of montage solutions” (67). Polyvision represented a natural extension of the visual arts and of filmmaking into multiple frames, and Gance’s daring technology is able to “run on” the same phenomena Eisenstein identifies and taxonomizes. What Eisenstein reaches for in the sequential ordering of one frame, Gance is able to elevate and

compound through three frames. Polyvision finds an exponentially heightened possibility for Eisenstein's own definitive *methods of montage*—metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtone and intellectual—to emerge in the dialectics between shots.

Eisenstein refers to each shot as the *cell* of the montage, and “just as cells in their division form a phenomenon of another order, the organism or embryo, so, on the other side of the dialectical leap from the shot, there is montage.” But if this theory using the language of science, its important need to keep in mind that pre-digital filmmaking wasn't biology: it was applied chemistry. The filmic process has always been chemical: a history of layers and emulsions, nitrate and cellulose acetate. When we try to save damaged, “vinegared” (the decomposing cellulose acetate) prints of films, we apply chemical processes to the film, we don't clip a frame into a petri dish or bury a reel in a garden and hope a new one sprouts up. By this chemical logic, each of Gance's three Polyvisual frames represent different molecules within the *mise en scene*, all bound together by the bonds of the frame, creating new intermolecular forces, bonds, reactions and charges transforming on the screen: alchemistry.

### **MULTISCREEN LANGUAGE RECLAIMED**

Multiscreen framing would reemerge as chic during the 1960s after World's Fair Expo '67 (Ebert 270) embraced this film form and format which, writes Judith Shatnoff reporting for *Film Quarterly*, “came on two screens, on three, five, six, nine in a circle, 112 moving screen-cubes,” and on and on. Walt Disney's entry, a travelogue titled *Canada '67*, was filmed in synchronized 35mm Circle-Vision 360° and projected onto nine screens. *Polar Life*, playing out over 11 screens, shows “elaborate temporal and spatial representations of the Arctic and Antarctic regions” and was created by a founder of the IMAX Corporation (*Cinema Expo 67*). An American entry produced by Polaroid and the United States Information Agency, *A Time to*

*Play* by Art Kane (photographer of “A Great Day in Harlem” fame), stayed closest to the now comparatively-humble Polyvision triptych model but, in its vignettes of playground games, exhibits the clean design and lean strength of the three-frame layout. Attendees waited hours for entry to these immersive documentaries (*Cinema Expo 67*). Shatnoff, in *Film Quarterly*, noted,

*“...one explanation for this general positive response is that the simultaneity of the multi-image, multi-screen medium is engrossing, intriguing. It involves a viewer in depth. He has to stretch imaginatively, to juggle and resolve impressions on multiple levels, conscious, unconscious, intellectual, emotional. Viewing is a challenge... We are aware that life is simultaneous, that any given moment a vast number of experiences and events occur... however, the multi-image, multi-screen medium, more than any other, allows a viewer to range and react individually, while he participates and is deeply involved. The medium is extremely flexible.”*

Of the mainstream films that would go on to use multi-frame techniques—*The Boston Strangler*, *The Longest Yard*, *Carrie*, among them—none used it as well and close to Gance’s original vision as the documentary, *Woodstock*. Roger Ebert singles out *Woodstock* among the crowd of films as a noteworthy example of split screen, saying the technique proposed by the production’s editor, Martin Scorsese...

*“... allows us to see the same rock group from several different points of view... it allows [director Michael] Wadleigh to advance the narrative of his film by showing the sky clouding up on one screen, while people hold down canvas on another. This is smoother, more simultaneous, than an orthodox style of cutting back and forth” (270).*

These accounts echo Gance himself, in 1968, saying “I would prove that Polyvision is really the language of the cinema, because now the eye is so rapid that one can see three screens simultaneously... when the multiple images meet the eye, there is kind of a visual explosion, a lightning spark in the brain.” (qtd. in Brownlow 1983).

To recount, the story of Polyvision goes like this: ecstatically envisioned and executed by one of cinema’s original innovators, released to rapturous crowds but just as soon discontinued because its expense didn’t match market concerns and, once the optical printing technology

which would make it economical was released just two years after, the market was still maximizing profits off of the recently-released sound film. Forty years later, it would be revitalized by corporate North America for a World's Fair and briefly become vogue as classical Hollywood transitioned to New Hollywood. Although it was still capital-intensive, Expo '67 and films like *Woodstock* turned the technology away from the giants of history and onto everyday life and events. Despite its resurgence, though, the intuitive multi-frame presentation would not become the cinematic revolution its architect envisioned. Gance's authoritative intent for Polyvision was to provide epic scale but built around a sense of divinity and historical revelation about Napoleon. The multi-frame was invented to accommodate hero worship, to beatify one of the most powerful humans of all of Western civilization. Inasmuch as the cinematic triptych refers to Gance's *Napoleon*, *Election Day* represents a continued subversion of the Polyvision tradition through a film about civic action, equality, egalitarianism, and the common person as significant, epoch-defining historical actor. Because digital film and non-linear editing software has liberated the Polyvisual image from economic and technological constraints, this totally unique and intuitive cinematic language, once inaccessible to even its inventor and, even in the 60s, used only by corporate and state sponsors with expendable capital, is available to all filmmakers. Polyvisual films now can be produced with consumer-grade cameras and exhibited with similarly-inexpensive, portable projectors.

The form itself is untraditional, although its power has always been in its immediacy, ease of comprehension, and "pop" function. However, the video triptych lends itself to alternative types of storytelling. Marshall McLuhan noted in 1969, "Multi-screen projection tends to end the storyline, as the symbolist poem ends narrative in verse. That is, multiple screens creating a simultaneous syntax eliminates the literary medium from film" (qtd. in

Marchessault). Likewise, “multiple projections take advantage of the opportunities multiple perspective offers for a departure from familiar ways of looking at social behavior” (Weibel). The history of documentary is the history of new technologies creating paths for new ways of storytelling. How has socially-minded documentary utilized multiple screens for non-fiction poetic social realism?

### **SOCIAL NON-FICTION OUTSIDE OF THE SINGLE FRAME**

While the history of multiscreen non-fiction video art has well-defined histories of performance, portraiture and environmental works, the origins of sociocultural documentary told through multiple screens intersects with the origins of another genre: reality TV. *The Continuing Story of Caryl and Ferd* (1972) predates *An American Family* by five months, and its form was as radical as its then unheard-of concept and scandalizing story. It was advertised upon its release as “underground video documentary soap opera—a closed-circuit, multiple-image, videotape novel about pornography, sexual identities, the institution of marriage, and the effect of living too close to an electronic medium” (qtd. in Boyle “American”). Caryl and Ferd represented the excesses of then-contemporary San Francisco, spurring a headline in the *New York Times* bemoaning “What the Underground Hath Wrought.”

In the film, Caryl, a documentary filmmaker and occasional adult film performer, is preparing in earnest to marry, against their friends’ wishes, her best friend, Ferd, who is gay and addicted to heroin. Video Free America—“part of a bustling national network of video freaks” (O’Connor D17) alongside People’s Video Theater, Videofreex, Global Village, Raindance, et al. (Boyle, “Guerilla”)—filmed the self-described documentary soap opera in characteristic Portapak-style cinema verité but exhibited it on a bank of eight televisions, stacked in two rows of four, the channels controlled live by a member of Video Free America (O’Connor D17). In the

program notes for “American Documentary Video: Subject to Change,” a 1988 video exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, this multichannel installation was presented as a single-channel film but its multiscreen origins were singled out, saying *Carel and Ferd* “marked a unique, if short-lived, contribution of video to the documentary form.”

In 1975, John Reilly and Stefan Moore of Global Village (with support from Yoko Ono and John Lennon) released *The Irish Tapes*, a three-channel, 12-monitor installation—not to mention the first feature-length documentary done on Portapak ½-inch tape—filmed during one of the most heated periods of Northern Irish conflict, following the National Association of Irish Freedom. (Shepard; EAI) Two recent, celebrated documentarians have also embedded themselves with militias and rebel groups to create multi-screen works. Richard Mosse’s *The Enclave* (2013) is a 40-minute, six-channel video about the daily lives of Congolese rebels in the nation’s ongoing civil war. (This work is also notable for its gorgeous use of Kodak Aerochrome, a discontinued infrared 16mm filmstock for military use that captures the omnipresent greens of the landscape and military uniforms as deep pinks.) Mosse dismisses his films being described as “a reaction to journalism,” saying instead that he is “an artist working in destinations where journalists also find themselves” (Frieze). Mark Boulos spent eight weeks living with two Communist guerrilla squads in the Philippine jungles for the three-screen *No Permanent Address* (2010) and, for two-screen *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (2008), the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta as they fight environmental and economic exploitation by the hands of oil interests in the region.

The tendency to evoke historical and political significance out of setting is intact in multi-screen documentary as well. Twin sisters Jane and Louise Wilson’s two-channel installation *Stasi City* (1997) finds historical echo in the abandoned interiors of an East Berlin secret police

headquarters. This work is ambient, unsettling, and wordless. As abstract as this treatment is, place-specific multi-screen documentary does approach its subject in a directly journalistic way. A documentary project about the Mexican-American border by Chantal Akerman exists as both a feature documentary, *De l'autre cote/From the Other Side (Fragment)* (2002), and a documentary installation, *From the Other Side* (2002), in which images of people and desertscapes play out over 19 monitors and one projection as Akerman's voice recounts the disappearance of a female Mexican immigrant in Los Angeles (Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo).

There is also a small but marked branch of multi-screen, social documentary concerned with democracy and the public sphere as defined and mapped out by Jurgen Habermas and the public sphere theorists in his wake. Since its introduction in 1964, the concept has become a field unto itself, but Habermas' original definition is dated but essential amidst the noise of politically and geographically competing meanings:

*By the "public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion — that is, with the guarantee of freedom and assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions — about matters of general interest. (49)*

Polish artist Artur Zmijewski's *Democracies* (2009) consists of 20 documentaries played simultaneously over 20 screens, representing public assemblies in diverse cities across Europe, and has been celebrated "as a phenomenological reconsideration of the observational documentary mode, which simultaneously critiques one of the foremost forms of representing reality and reignites its potential" (Harvey). While this installation's maximalist scope is concerned with the larger European identity, Sharon Hayes' *After Before* (2005) tries to capture a more localized and intimate sense of character and color through its multiscreen strategy. In the

direct cinema tradition of Rouch & Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), Pasolini's *Love Meetings* (1965), and Quinn & Tanager's *Inquiring Nuns* (1968), Hayes goes into the streets New York City to interview people in Summer 2004, before the presidential election, and Spring 2005, after Bush's reelection. Her interviews play out over five screens, integrating voices from diverse walks of life: George McGovern and Bill Ayers are interviewed alongside bus drivers and students (Burton). This fractalized survey of a community, says curator Juli Carson, is "predicated on the realization that communities are in fact rhizomatic and contradictory. It wasn't a lost community Hayes was searching for, but a contingent one, present amidst all this historic noise."

The relational aesthetics of multiscreen approaches to socially-engaged documentary filmmaking emphasizes the supremacy of the experiential over the dominance of narrative. In *Election Day*, the triptych strategy is inherently political in that it provides an alternative to Little Rock's post-Central, post-Clinton narratives while also looking past all of the "historical noise" of the day to find honest expressions of the public sphere. The emphasis on experience is also echoed by the audience work required by a multiscreen installation, in which the viewer's attention is suggested by the accompanying audio mix but nevertheless encouraged to roam the frame as an observer allowed to naturally wander throughout a public space.

## **TWO AMERICAN CARTOONISTS**

Documentary work is intrinsically interdisciplinary and through the making of this movie, I kept returning to the bottomless number of ink and paper portraits created by Jason Polan. The creator of the blog *Every Person in New York* in 2008 and, in 2015, the same-titled book, has produced a prolific amount of jittery yet nimble sketches of people in New York City. Some are scheduled through an open invitation on his blog (its sidebar offers, "I will be on the

corner of 14th street and 8th avenue on the North-east corner of the street from 2:42-2:44pm this Thursday wearing a bright yellow jacket and navy rubber boots, for example”). Some were made through the group he established for weekly meetups at a Taco Bell, the Taco Bell Drawing Club, which offers personalized and laminated membership cards for official members. (Fry, 2018) In 2005, he made simple black and white drawings of every piece of art in the Museum of Modern Art and published a book called *The Every Piece of Art In The Museum Of Modern Art Book*. But by and large the bulk of his drawings were observed in public, created in public, about the public and, through his constantly-updated blog, published directly to the public.

As a body, his presumptive “hundreds of thousands” of drawings are deeply and even tenderly observed. Even when the results are quick-sketched and hasty, these figurative portraits witness the point where mundanity and humanity intersect with the everyday comedy of life in New York City. As Jerry Saltz noted of Polan, who he compared to Matt Groening and Saul Steinberg, there is an absolute absence of irony in his work. Drawings like “Man sitting on a bag full of soccer balls” and “Man painting a step on Bowery and Great Jones, his pant legs wrapped in garbage bags” emphasize what makes each subject unique and draws out an essential dignity and even near-divinity where a lesser artist and person might caricature, stress the grotesque, “punch down,” or simply not draw them at all. Compare these images of people in Polan’s New York with the regularly spiteful caricatures of New Yorkers exported by, say, *Seinfeld*. Polan’s work could be said to be similarly about nothing, but it finds substance and light in the mundane between-moment, the dignified individual in the anonymous, all while using his tools to depict the big, intimidating New York City as neighborly, familiar and intertwined as the *Wild Wild World of Richard Scarry*. That concern with visually documenting place and the breadth of

public life with such generosity of spirit draws Polan closer to documentary and the conventions of Frederick Wiseman, or Gordon Quinn and Steve James, all drawn by Polan.

These portraits occasionally move past the individual and into groups and the event, expressing a busy multiplicity and neo-expressionist energy not dissimilar to Basquiat and Haring before him. “People at Pride on Barrow and Bleecker” shows figures marching underneath a skyline of rooftops, disembodied street markers, and fast food signs. A mohawk over here, a flat-bill cap over there, matching “I’m His” and “He’s Mine” shirts hovering above a squiggle of curled hair, pursed lips, and cut eyes. “People on Prince & Greene Streets” is a bustle of hair, lips, glasses, bicycle wheels, and an umbrella or two. In these portraits, the group is an individual unit, overlapping as time is condensed, not unlike memory, onto the paper.

By coincidence, while making *Election Day* I was presented with yet another cartoonist, this one from the other end of American history. While researching early American representations of Election Day, I discovered the work of English-born Henry Dawkins. Trained as a blacksmith before emigrating, Dawkins was an etcher of bookplates, maps, and music as well as a Freemason and “ornamenter of buttons” (Bedini, 46), but Dawkins also wrote, produced, published, and sold his own political, copper-plate engravings to bookstores and taverns alike throughout revolutionary and pre-revolutionary New York and Pennsylvania. (Melby, 2008; Cobb, 114)

Two of Dawkins’ 1765 prints stand as the earliest American visual documents of the voting process and use the power of the assembled crowd to depict colonial-era Election Day in Pennsylvania. In “The Election, a Medley, Humbly Inscribed to Squire Lilliput, Professor of Scurrility,” the amassed groups are divided along differing religious and denominational lines. A Presbyterian minister offers “saving grace for a vote.” A group of established carpenters hand

out pre-filled ballots to “bovine German voters.” Not to be outdone, the Devil himself appears at the bottom of the frame, asking “How goes matters now?” Similarly, “The Election, Humbly Inscib’d to the Saturday-Nights Club, in Lodge Alley” takes place at the same recognizable courthouse, this time pictured planimetrically instead of in perspective. Above the voters, speech bubbles containing snippets of conversation jostle for space, overlapping to make a fittingly noisy frame. In both, the composition of small vignette, the scale of people to place, the implied cacophony and the intersecting dark comedy of it all recall the hectic tableau of Bruegel the Elder or Bosch (or, later, the politically and audibly discordant films of Robert Altman). Dawkins’ expansive images set him apart from other cartoonists and engravers working at the time, including Paul Revere, whose images were framed closer together with fewer characters and more dialogue, emphasizing dialogue and interpersonal conversation instead of group dynamic.

In the work of both Polan and Dawkins, cartoonists have become chroniclers—one light, one dark, both comedic—of contemporary civic life in their respective homes. Their works are both site-specific but depend on the people they capture to convey the energy and personality of the places and time they occupy. Here, Dawkins’ Philadelphia is defined by its class and religious divisions while the grounds around its voting place are seedy with electioneering and crooked religious figures. Conversely, Polan’s egalitarian sea of people of New York become harmonious, unified through individual uniqueness instead of uniformity, a unified life-expression spread across class, gender, race, age, and ability. These historically-opposed cartoonists and their work offer insights on how to visually chronicle a place and its people. Dawkins offers a way of looking at the holistic civic body as consisting of contrasting cliques, small dramas playing out simultaneously across a spatial image. Polan, in turn, looks past the fragmented political dynamic and into the commonplace humanity of us all.

## UNCENTERING WHITENESS

Martin Berger, in his 2011 book “Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography” questions the photojournalistic legacy of Little Rock’s desegregation head on. The book asserts that the images of the civil rights era—selected and disseminated through the editorial process—provoked white sympathy while still serving white interests by reinforcing racial binaries. The majority of photos run in newspapers and magazines were of the spectacle of violence on black bodies instead of photos of black bravery, determination or anger (4-5). “For well-meaning whites—whether reporters, editors, or artists—photographs that too obviously illustrated active blacks and inactive whites held scant allure” (27). The effect, Berger argues, placated the white moderate and blunted the scope of racial reform.

My documentary work on Little Rock, to be worthy of its subject matter and setting, has to pass on the lazy comfort of so-called post-racial cliché and liberal platitudes for an actively, unmistakably anti-racist portrait of a city with an inescapable racial legacy and a problematic racial present. Author, critic and race historian Ibram X. Kendi explains this antiracist stance—extended here to art and media—as the capacity to “emancipate oneself from the dueling consciousness....the White body no longer presents itself as the American body; the Black body no longer strives to be the America body, knowing there is no such thing as the American body, only American bodies, racialized by power” (34). As a film about a unified, American body of a diverse public sphere, *Election Day* asks the viewer to look both at and past race simultaneously. Here the racial conversation is in how the images of race are arranged, emphasized and de-emphasized in moments when the ethnographic character of Little Rock isn’t defined by the ethnographic color of Little Rock. It is more concerned with cutting through the political noise

and into a timeless sense of *comm-unity* than dwelling on explicitly political expressions about specifically-2018 America.

The philosopher Paul C. Taylor, in his book *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, provides an acrostic spelling out the “consensus racial metaphysic” between himself and other philosophical race theorists working today. The CAMPS (Critical-Artifactual-Modern-Political-Social) approach is an underpinning of a “conceptual terrain” of contemporary theory and conversation and informs the direction of this movie as well.

1. *It treats race critically, which is to say that it refuses the seductions of classical racialism*
2. *It treats races as artifacts, which is to say that they are the results of the meaning-laden exercise of human agency.*
3. *It treats race as a modern invention, which is to say at the very least that the most influential forms of race-thinking emerge during the modern period, and perhaps that the very idea of race is a modern innovation.*
4. *It treats race as a political phenomenon, which is compatible with a number of stronger or weaker claims about the connection between racial formation and political life.*
5. *It accepts the social dimension of race, which is to say that whatever else it is, race is not simply a matter of individual whim, choice, or preference... (87)*

Creating work that not only includes but relies upon previously-created images of blackness—again, in the inescapable historical light of Little Rock—skates the edges of ethical image-making. Visual theorist and author of *Seeing Through Race*, W.J.T. Mitchell proposes that “we see race as a *medium*, an intervening substance... something we see through, like a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens, rather than something we look at.” Mitchell specifies that one dimension of this mediating role of race is *time-based* “that both has a history and itself narrates a history.” This narrative speaks to “bodies and bloodlines at the most abstract, but actual practices, institutions, and events as well” (21). Is it possible to depoliticize or dehistoricize images of white people voting in white neighborhood polling places alongside images of black people voting in black neighborhood polling places when the white right to vote is as old as

America itself and the black right to vote was protected only 55 years ago with the Voting Rights Act in 1965? The history of representation in observational documentary is consistently marked by problematic gaze and anglocentrism by white filmmakers. Critical philosopher George Yancy identifies this tendency

*“to gaze upon the black in a typical encounter, from the perspective of whiteness, often means seeing nothing but a body imprinted with culturally and historically embedded significations—though believed to be fixed, essential significations—that derive from the power of whiteness to map thoroughly the meaning of what it is to be black (and white) (12)*

This film is full of images of race in red-lined voting precincts, Black neighborhoods, and youthful political positions. These exist within the city’s inevitable context, but each character is significant because of their agency in the moment and not simply as a black body to be mapped and signified. It was necessary to decenter the whiteness of Little Rock’s character and acknowledge race in order for this film to operate outside of the structure of racial difference as “founded on a master signifier—Whiteness—that produces a logic of differential relations” (Seshadri-Crooks 20).

*Election Day* is structured by (and finds that Lacanian master signifier in) diversity—racial, but class and generational as well—as the organic default of a community from its opening scenes. The media scrum on the state capitol steps subverts whiteness (and the adjacent political image-making process) as “standard” or “center” (Hitchcock & Flint). The juxtaposition between the end of the Capitol scene—of French Hill and Asa Hutchinson and their supporters—and the next scene of Linda sign-shaking for Frank Scott outside of a polling place acknowledges this racial difference. The political and monocultural performance for the news camera speaks to the hegemonical construction and proliferation of whiteness and white political dominance as the default. Linda, in turn, becomes the anchored image of the community by breaking the fourth

wall and acknowledging the camera (“I’m gonna be in the movie!”); talking to a voter about their candidate, Frank Scott, being the son of one of their classmates; and acknowledging how people react to her *difference* as embodied in her froggy voice—and her embrace of and joy in it!

Direct and observational documentary defines and interprets its social and political situation largely through its subjects’ behavior. But there is no such thing as white or black behavior, only individual behavior (Kendi 114). In this film, Little Rock’s diverse individuality plays out across a generational and racial spectrum. Multiracialism is not the salient element of any of its scenes, but exclusive whiteness stands out as intentional and inorganic.

During its production, my friend and veteran cameraperson Patrick Rogers, as a Black man, was able to capture moments that a white cameraman likely wouldn’t have had the same access: the scene of the older interracial couple being driven to vote and the woman stressing the Black vote outside of the Scott election party in particular. And there’s no doubt the content I captured, filmed in whatever voting place I found myself driving to at a whim, speaks to my own white privilege of being able to travel across Little Rock’s diverse neighborhoods to film without fear or censure. Even the times I found minor pushback from poll workers could have ended much differently had I been an uncredentialed black woman instead. But throughout the editing process, I had to constantly recalibrate my own intrinsic biases as a white man telling a story with deep racial roots. I wasn’t trafficking in images of death, poverty or strife, or glorifying an aesthetic of Southern poverty, or celebrating Black culture while overlooking Black life. But I was telling a story where race as an element was at the foreground.

From the beginning, this was an integrated, inclusive and antiracist Southern film about the tapestry of the public sphere. But still I had to check myself thoroughly and constantly through the editing process, removing potentially problematic scenes when it was called for. One

sequence involving three black men—a little person, an elderly man, and a third who had been drinking—shaking campaign signs from lawn chairs across from a polling place felt like a perpetuation of racialized imagery and an uncomfortable juxtaposition with a similar, whiter scene with an older white man outside of the voting commissioner’s office. Another sequence filmed at the Arkansas Republican Party’s election night event at Embassy Suites contrasted a red-lit ballroom full of privileged, conservative party leaders and media representatives with evening polling scenes from around town. The meaning generated by this sequence—that democratic participation was illusory because the economic inequality displayed implied an oligarchy—may be true in fact but was a poor fit for the movie. By moving its gaze away from the public sphere and into a literal hall of power, the scene emphasized class difference and power over people instead of racial, generational, civic unity as power through and to people.

*Election Day* is not necessarily a Black documentary, but it is a progressive, anti-racial film created with care, respect, and attention to community, political expression, and celebrating the range of personalities in a unique, diverse Southern city still historically tethered to its racist past.

## PRODUCTION NARRATIVE

### LITTLE ROCK SCHOOL DISTRICT

*Election Day* spun off of my previous film, *88.3 FM & The Voice of the People*, which filmed in January and February of 2017. That film takes place in the days leading up to the Trump inauguration, capturing the staff and volunteers at community radio station KABF as emblematic of progressive America, the modern South, and Little Rock itself. One of the central stories of that documentary followed the closure of four public Little Rock elementary schools in minority neighborhoods and the ensuing public backlash against the decision.

These closings represented the latest battle in the ongoing war between the Arkansas State Board of Education-run Little Rock School District and the teachers' union, the Little Rock Educational Association, that goes back to January 2015 when the Arkansas State Board of Education voted 5-4 to take over the Little Rock School District and dissolve its democratically-elected school board. The Associated Press described students, teachers, and community members as "overwhelmingly opposed to the takeover." Local discussion revolved around the dubious and political motivations behind the decision, which was framed locally as a "Walton-Hutchinson takeover of Little Rock schools" (Brantley) and nationally, in *Salon*, as an "education dogfight" started by "billionaire charter advocates...[in a] carefully orchestrated effort, begun months prior, to undermine the state's public school system, destroy its teachers unions and turn public funds into private profits" (Holloway). By July 2016, the *Washington Post* would evoke segregation in Little Rock, running the headline "Little Rock schools desegregated 59 years ago. Now 'we are retreating to 1957'" (Bryant). *The Atlantic*, too, inquired into "How Segregation Has Persisted in Little Rock" and fingered the Walton Family Foundation as the main influence behind the battle.

88.3 criticizes the Little Rock School District for invoking the legacy of Martin Luther King for its annual Kingfest celebration while actively working to disenfranchise poor, minority, and underserved people from the district. Its most impassioned scene is a community meeting at Wilson Elementary School—a school that was closed by the state soon after—between state-appointed LRSD Superintendent Mike Poore and a gathering of angry Wilson parents and community activists. The meeting happened on the eve of Trump’s election and I felt captured the anger and disbelief of the community contra the emboldening of private interests and ideological politicians working together in hostile public takeovers. The school storyline, I felt, needed to be revisited as an epilogue to 88.3, which was buoyed by its characters’ anxieties about what was to come during the Trump years.

By October 2018, in the weeks leading up to the midterm elections, the Little Rock Educational Association employees union and Arkansas education commissioner Johnny Key were at another much-publicized and heated standstill after Key asked for a waiver from teacher dismissal rules which would allow immediate termination of teachers in “D”-rated and “F”-rated schools (Stromquist). As the annual contract deadline loomed, Commissioner Key stated he wouldn’t renew the contract with the LREA teachers’ union in its current form with its termination protections (Faull). With the possibility of a strike on the table, the LREA teachers’ union held a meeting on October 28 at the downtown First United Methodist Church to reject Key’s proposal. The meeting was closed to the media but open to the public. Local interest was so high that the number of people exceeded the capacity of the church so that many, wearing red to support the LREA, had to follow along from outside (Simpson). Key authorized a two-week extension to the teachers, possibly in order to avoid work stoppage. Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson accused the teachers’ union of “fear mongering” (qtd. in Howell) while all three of

Little Rock's mayoral candidates, including former state-appointed LRSD superintendent Baker Kurrus, and Hutchinson's opponent, Democrat Jared Henderson, publicly sided with the teachers' unions (Herzog). By this time, large, colorful protests were happening outside of targeted school districts as well as the governor's mansion, all populated by teachers, parents, students, local activists, and state and national media.

On Sunday, October 28, I received a text from a politically active friend and local filmmaker Zach Turner about what was happening. He suggested the LRSD/LREA story would be an incredible documentary in and of itself, I was convinced that it should be an epilogue to 88.3, and we both resolved to film what we could over the next few days. I reached out to local activists who could put me on the inside track with events and key players, and was told to expect a citywide strike on Thursday, November 1. I spent Monday reaching out to other locals, the management at KABF, and people running for office about filming with them over the next week.

### **FIVE DAYS IN THE FIELD BEFORE ELECTION DAY**

By Tuesday, October 30, I was back in Little Rock in the field with the camera running. I spent the morning with the hosts of *Community Voices* on KABF, union leader and pastor Toney Orr, activist and city council candidate Robert Webb and Neil Sealy, the executive director of the state's largest grassroots organization, the Arkansas Community Institute. Later that day I accompanied gubernatorial candidate Jared Henderson going from his campaign headquarters to the teachers' protest and rally at Henderson Middle School. Wednesday morning, I began filming other sign-shaking events outside of LRSD schools, starting at sunrise. That afternoon, I reported to the Arkansas Governor's Mansion as a hundred or more teachers, activists, candidates, and media gathered outside of the Hutchinsons' residence, demonstrating with signs,

bullhorns, and chants. Thursday, I spent time with Little Rock mayoral candidate Warwick Sabin, in his car and outside of Henderson Middle School as he discussed his views on the situation with the public schools. Like Henderson, mayoral hopeful Sabin commented on the timing of the hot-button protests happening in the days leading up to the much-contested local and national elections. Friday brought more protest and content from early voting locations around town, including Dunbar community gardens and the downtown Little Rock courthouses, both included in *Election Day*. Saturday, I returned again to KABF studios to film Judge Wendell Griffin and poet/preacher/activist Zac Crow's weekly program, *The Shop*, as they discussed the hostile takeover of the public school system. That night, I also reached out on Facebook to LREA president Teresa Knapp Gurdon about the slim chance of getting permission to film the next LREA meeting, which was going to be closed to both the public and the press. In the message, I made it clear that "I understand and respect that LREA is being very careful about who films and when, but I'm hoping you would consider giving me access as a sympathetic documentarian."

I took a phone call with Knapp, who explained that she couldn't give me that access herself, but I could come to the clandestine meeting at the First United Methodist Church that Monday night (the eve of the elections) and wait to be called in from outside. She would read a statement written by me to the members, which would be the first item on the agenda, and they would vote yes or no on me filming. The statement I sent over emphasized my understanding of the delicacy and cause for concern about an interloper like myself asking for their trust to document the explicitly secret and deeply consequential conversations on that night's order. I promised to keep the footage confidential until it was added into 88.3 and I would blur the faces of any people who requested anonymity and let LREA screen the film before it was released.

Again, I emphasized my solidarity with LREA, my history writing for similarly-concerned outlets like the *Arkansas Times*, and my role in sharing this story and these moments with a broader audience.

Thursday night was also my first night out with another shooter. Patrick Rodgers, another close friend who works as professional camera operator for top-tier reality television and sports, filmed a community meeting at Little Rock's Southwest Community Center. The meetings were hosted by Arkansas Community Organizations—spun-off of the late ACORN umbrella of community organizations—to address their neighborhoods' jeopardized schools. Patrick was able to get footage of mayoral candidate Sabin, Rep. Joyce Elliott (who appears in the Wilson Elementary scene in *88.3*), from the *Community Voices* shoot, Neil Sealy, and Dr. Anika Whitfield, a notable public advocate, school volunteer, Baptist minister, and podiatrist who had just published a piece in *Huffington Post* titled, “Public School Closures Are An Attack On Arkansans of Color.” Dr. Whitfield was one of the first people I reached out to the previous week and her help connecting me with people, resources, and events was invaluable. Although it didn't make this movie, her spiritedness in the sign-waving protest scenes from the days before perfectly captured the public mood. She has been a friend to this production ever since and the scene shot the following day of her taking her aunt to the polls is maybe my favorite scene in *Election Day*.

While Patrick filmed at the community center, I drove downtown to the teachers' union meeting, walked with my gear through a torrential rainstorm and up to the church steps where I was intercepted by a security guard who asked who I was and why I was there. I showed him my texts with Gordon, he spoke to someone inside, and told me to come through the doors and wait in the narthex. (Appropriately, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes that “in the early days of

Christianity, the narthex was the only portion of the church to which...those preparing for the sacrament of baptism and penitents were admitted.”) While I waited and listened to the conversation coming in from the sanctuary where the union was meeting, two other members of the union served as inner guards, polite but cautious about the possible infiltration. After ten minutes, I was called into the sanctuary where Gordon, instead of reading the statement I prepared for her, introduced me to a suspicious crowd (some people’s faces couldn’t contain their skepticism and scorn for me, already), handed me a microphone and asked me to state my case for letting me film. Being already nervous and then knocked totally off-guard by having to address the congregation and make my case in front of the steeliest, no-quarter speakers around—K-12 educators—who were already cynical and testy, facing down work stoppages, immediate and no-contest terminations that would no doubt be politicized, extended amounts of time without necessary paychecks and the threat of arrest, I did my best to hit the high points of the statement I sent to her previously. I also made sure to share something between my press/media credentials and flat-out, shamelessly namedropping two beloved institutions: the University of Arkansas and its School of Journalism, and the production company Kartemquin Films, of *Hoop Dreams* and *America to Me*, two documents about politics in public education, systematic and institutional inequality playing out in the public school systems that I assumed (and still do) were reputable in educational circles and likely on a few syllabi along the way.

There was no question that the crowd was divided, firmly and down the middle, on whether or not to let me document the meeting. Many expressed concerns that I could be lying, a mole from the Walton Family Foundation, or worse. One union member even pointed at me, singling out how jittery I was while addressing them and that honest people “aren’t typically that on edge.” The other side rallied around the fact that the union was publicly assembling two or

three times a day in outspoken protests of Key, Poore, and the Arkansas State Board of Education. Their identities weren't private. And furthermore, one voice added, how would he have faith that his fellow board members would be brave enough to vote on and hold a strike if they weren't brave enough to be filmed? The issue went to a voice vote, which was indecisive. I struck a concession, saying that I wouldn't film the faces, just the backs of the heads, of the people in the pews, focusing instead on Gordon and the union leadership assembled in the choir lofts and seats around the altar. Gordon called for a vote by hand and the group of 200-plus decided, if only by less than a handful of yes votes, to allow me to film. I signaled my gratitude, ran to my gear, and got to work.

Behind the lectern, Gordon, by request from the National Education Association, was running down an unpleasant list of very real and immediate consequences the crowd needed to be aware of should they decide, in a future meeting, to strike: days out are made up at the end of the year, the teachers could be fired or arrested, how to handle taking out loans if need be, the need to ensure that their students can be fed should they close the schools down. Her energy in the frame is fantastic: short-haired and square-shouldered in Little Rock Education Association red, speaking soberly to the crowd in a power stance behind an ornate wooden pulpit. "This ain't a ballgame, folks," she said. "You don't get to sit it out. You either stand up for something or you lose everything, that's the way this game goes." It was a moody, tense night, and it shows through in the footage. A member stood to rouse the crowd about Jared Henderson, assuring everyone that if ("not if: when!") Henderson won tomorrow, there would be a new state education commissioner on his first day in office. What a bolster to the footage of him out in support of the teachers against the state establishment.

I wouldn't know it then, but none of these sequences—not the access with mayoral and gubernatorial candidates, not at the ground-zero community meeting, and not even the incredible conflict in the teachers' union meeting—would make the movie. Neither 88.3 nor *Election Day* (with the exception of voting sites at the Pulaski County Election Commission office and Dunbar Recreation Center) would use any of this great footage. But the next day would be crucial.

## **PREPARING TO DOCUMENT ELECTION DAY**

### **1. Relevant law**

Before going out on Election Day, I knew I wanted to film inside of voting places throughout the city from a personal distance, not intimate portraits of people voting, but capturing the spaces in which people were voting in different neighborhoods throughout the city. Because of the efforts during election before to spread awareness about different state's policies toward “voting selfies,” it was going to be necessary to check the laws. The state Board of Election Commissioners lays out the statutes relevant to documentary filming as such:

*§ 7-5-521. Arrangement of polling place.*

*(a) The exterior of the voting machine and every part of the polling place shall be in plain view of the poll workers.*

*(b) The machine shall be placed so that no person can see or determine how the voter casts his or her vote.*

*(c) After the opening of the polls, the poll workers shall not allow any person to pass to the part of the room where the machine is situated, except for the purpose of voting.*

*§ 7-5-607. Arrangement of polling place.*

*In precincts where an electronic vote tabulating device is used, sufficient space shall be provided for the use of the device, and it shall be arranged in such a manner as to assure secrecy in voting.*

*§ 7-5-524. Voter access to machines -- Persons in line at closing time.*

*(a) During the time that the polls are open for voting, no more voters shall be permitted to approach the voting machine than there are vacant machines available for voting.*

*7-5-310. Privacy -- Assistance to disabled voters.*

*(a) Each voter shall be provided the privacy to mark his or her ballot. Privacy shall be provided by the poll workers at each polling site.*

A quick phone call to the Elections Commission solidified these boundaries and provided the hard and fast rule to not film peoples' ballots being marked, which I was more than happy to abide by and to give a six-foot privacy zone when filming voting booths, which I later found articulated in the 2020 state Board of Election Commissioners' procedures manual as well (125). It was of the highest importance to go about this professionally and work within the boundaries. It's one thing to be independent and guerrilla, it's another to be a scofflaw stumbling into breaking laws.

## 2. Crew

I arranged for a small crew of camera people to start filming that night. Zach Turner, who originally shook my attention towards what was happening in the school district; Patrick Rogers, who filmed the community meeting the night before would come out again; and Rachel Bernstein and Austin Sisk would come down from UARK to help. Because this shoot was going to be for 88.3, I asked if the documentary's producer, friend and pharmacist Sam Hutchens, could pay small day rates. We agreed that \$150 for coming in from Fayetteville and \$100 for locals was fair. (Now that I used the footage for my thesis instead of the original film, I owe Sam \$500. That's entertainment.)

## 3. Mapping

The night before, I printed out a map of polling places in Little Rock and referred to it throughout the next day while I was filming by myself. Even as someone who prides myself on having seen every corner of Little Rock, I found myself driving into neighborhoods I'd never been into and even finding a few streets I'd never been down. Twitter became useful for planning the next day as well, so I kept an eye on the #arpx hashtag for any events or rallies that might be worth filming.

## ACTUAL ELECTION DAY

Election Day started with a trip to Community Bakery to get coffee and breakfast but also to see if there were any pre-dawn political happenings in a spot notable for local and state politico gatherings. No such luck, so I drove straight to the State Capitol to start filming at 6:30 a.m. as the morning news crews began filming candidates and their supporters on the steps of the building. The fog that morning was as thick as anything I'd seen since, appropriately enough, Trump's inauguration week. By some meteorological fluke, the second half of January 2017 brought uncharacteristically thick and near-un navigable fog onto Little Rock. The weather reappearing as such again felt like a good omen.

After saying hello to Jared Henderson's campaign manager (and my contact) Abbi Henderson and their crew again and arranging to meet with them later, I began filming the candidates, their crews, and the morning newscasters setting about their work. Governor Hutchinson and Senator French Hill, who would both win handily that day, as well as Henderson, provided Election Day energy on cue for the cameras, which looked great for my footage as well. This movie is concerned with image-making and political economies, so a media scrum at the center of state political power was a fantastic way to start the day and, ultimately, the movie.

I left the Capitol for the East End, stopping off at the Arkansas Arts Center, which was soon to be torn down and renovated, for some foggy morning shots, and took a few additional shots of political signs arranged around Macarthur Park. The drive to the Nathaniel Hill Community Complex proved to be fruitless. The poll workers on the inside weren't willing to have me inside, so I acquiesced and left, taking a loss from my second poll of the day. Throughout the day, I'd always approach the poll workers first and ask for permission to shoot,

letting them know I was doing unobtrusive documentary portraits that emphasized more of the architecture of the room itself and not so much of the faces of the people voting (the main exception being with Dr. Whitfield and her aunt). I made sure to let the poll workers know that I wasn't going to push the limits of the law or the "six-foot rule," definitely wasn't going to film people's ballots, that the elections office knew our crew was filming that day, and that I would like to take a few shots. Of the vast majority that were fine with us filming—and most were gracious and inviting—I don't think any polling places were filmed for more than three or four minutes.

After losing one on the East End, I went to the Capitol High District to visit my own home poll at the Greater Archview Baptist Church, where I met Linda, the sign shaker with the distinctive voice outside. She graciously let me film her doing her work and shared a few thoughts about the election with me. I was lucky enough to capture her talking to an old friend from the neighborhood and sharing that Frank Scott's mother was a classmate of theirs. Inside, the same elderly people were running the polls that had always been there when I went and were happy to let me film.

From there I went to St. John's Vision Center, a community space on South Main, to film a couple Henderson volunteers and the campaigning outside of the building where the vote was being held. Inside, the polling place had spread out across a basketball gym—already a keen difference in the architectures of polling places when compared to the tiny, low-ceiling room at Greater Archview. Outside, I spoke to Judge Marion Humphrey for a bit. The LRSD-Wilson Elementary scene in 88.3 ends with him upbraiding Superintendent Poore, Commissioner Key, Gov. Hutchinson, and the Walton Family, and it made for probably the most crowd-pleasing moment in that film.

I took a call from Dr. Whitfield, telling me to meet her and her aunt at Pilgrim's Rest Missionary Baptist Church. Because this was my first (and only) time I would film subjects inside of a polling place, I brought my 18-135 long lens so I could be get in close enough to capture their faces while still standing six feet away from the voting booths. Intergenerationality is a constant theme throughout my work, so capturing this sweet moment between Dr. Whitfield and her beautiful, photogenic aunt—whose age suggests stories about what her political involvement was like when she was her niece's age—was very special and I was honored to capture their portraits together.

Leaving the South End, I drove to Buffington Towers, a public-housing community in the Governor's Mansion District, to meet Alex Handfinger, a friend and long-time activist and organizer, in the parking lot as he worked to organize transportation to the polls with his team. He and I drove to another public downtown housing complex, checked in and went to the main office to see if anyone wanted to vote but left empty-handed and without permission to film in the housing complex. He connected me with his coworker, Tomiko Townley, who we would meet with later that evening.

Stiff Station, the historical and progressive, middle- and lower-middle class neighborhood abutting downtown, was up next. I immediately was drawn to three men all shaking signs across the road—an older man seated in a folding chair, a younger man beside him and little person with a Frank Scott sign—and went over to talk. They were all hired to shake signs and none admitted to being terribly politically involved, although the older gentleman showed me a picture of him and Bill Clinton taken together when he worked as a custodian at the library. Outside of the polling building, a worker explained to a woman wearing a surgical mask where she needed to go to vote. Inside, I was given permission to film and had a couple

conversations with some of the poll workers that didn't make the final cut. One told me that poll work is the only work he does, saying "I ride my bicycle, I dance, and I work about two days a year on even years."

From there, I returned to the Arkansas Arts Center to meet Bryan Frazier, former station manager at KABF and then-candidate for city council. I captured a conversation with him and a group of people talking about how radio changed for the worse after online streaming was introduced, but, again, this would have worked for 88.3 but not in *Election Day*, as hard as I tried, so this stayed on the cutting room floor.

The day before, Warwick Sabin connected me with his campaign manager, Brian Gregory, and suggested we get together. He and I spoke the day before and set up a time on Election Day for me to film at the headquarters. I showed up at the historic downtown Howe Building to meet Brian, a young black man spearheading the campaign at only 23-years old—and easily the oldest person in the Sabin headquarters. To be running a campaign at such an age was shocking but called to mind Clinton's youth-driven staffs in the 1990s. It became apparent, when I went to the phone bank section of the space, that he was the oldest person in the room. About twenty volunteers were seated along a set of long booths making last-minute phone calls and checking their computers, which, more often than not, were blanketed with stickers.

I didn't have any luck getting my calls and requests returned by the Kurrus and Scott campaigns and likely only got access to Sabin because we had known each other professionally and socially for a decade at that point but knew that Brian Gregory was a compelling character. He was benevolent with his time and we decided I would meet up with him and his staff again that night for Sabin's party at Sticky Fingerz.

That afternoon, the neck-in-neck three-way race between the three mayoral candidates—former *Oxford American* publisher and current state representative Sabin, former LRSD superintendent Baker Kurrus, and the 35-year old former banking executive Frank Scott Jr. who stood to become Little Rock’s first black mayor—was still heated, an absolute dead heat between the three well-liked candidates. I walked two blocks over to the Scott headquarters to check in one more time and found an empty office. Everyone from his staff was in the field, but the volunteer manning the headquarters took my number and said they would follow up with me.

By this time in late afternoon, I knew if I had any choice to get to West Little Rock, I needed to beat the traffic. The next shoot was at Temple B’nai Israel, where I walked into a diverse group of people—a bored young kid hanging on his mom’s clothes, a very stoned teenager and a woman wearing hijab—milling about and voting under a golden menorah mounted on the wall as a Holocaust memorial.

The rest of the team was getting ready to join, so we decided to meet up at Vino’s Brew Pub before executing our game plan. Zach would film outside a fire station that serves as a polling place and then put in an hour at KATV studios. News director Nick Genty got us in touch with operations manager Kenny Reynolds, giving us access to film the night’s newscast being made, which turned out to be essential in continuing our portraits of journalism work and image-making as well as providing context and information during the night’s returns.

Patrick Rogers returned to Dunbar Gardens, where he captured an essential moment of the movie when a young professor from Philander Smith College was speaking to a reporter from the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette about the treatment poll workers gave to the group of students she brought from campus to vote. This moment, questioning the legitimacy of Arkansas’s newly passed voter identification laws, would reoccur in the next setting. There,

Patrick connected with Alex Handfinger's coworker, Tomiko Townley, joining her to take two of her clients to the polls. While on the way to vote, her client Dovey was unable to find her state i.d., worrying she left it at the food pantry she visited the day previous. The question of whether or not she and her husband would be able to make it to the polls in time if they had to turn around and look for it at home with thick with tension before she eventually found it behind an obscure zipper of her purse. This story, of an older couple exercising their right to vote with the help of a community worker, became one of the most tender moments of the entire movie.

While I returned to West Little Rock to film the last minute, nighttime voters at Pleasant Valley Church of Christ, Rachel Bernstein and Austin Sisk arrived from Fayetteville and began taking footage of downtown at night and making their way to the election night parties that were beginning to form. Rachel went to Table 42, the bar and restaurant at the Clinton Library, for the Jared Henderson campaign. That party ended early, as Gov. Hutchinson became the projected winner three minutes after polls closed. Tim made way to the Baker Kurrus party at Cajun's Wharf. Pleasant Valley Church was the first place all day where I had major push-back from a poll worker. After checking in with the front desk and given permission to film, another worker emerged from another room and told me I was breaking the law. I let her know I was given permission to film (by her superiors) and wasn't breaking any laws. She wanted to take my entire camera, I told her that wasn't going to happen and she probably needed to call the elections office if she wanted to go any further. I waited in a chair, camera on my lap, as she made the call and was told she was in the wrong. After burning some time (I thought of it like drawing a bad card in the documentary-making board game) I waved goodbye to the people I spoke to at the front desk and left to get back downtown.

I spent about 15 minutes filming an election night watch party at White Water Tavern before Zach left KATV to relieve me there so I could meet the Sabin campaign at Sticky Fingerz. The mayoral results were coming in and still neck and neck. Because a runoff election was assumed in the days leading up to the vote and, this night, seemed like a sure thing, the question wasn't who would win, but who was going to lose. I heard back from the Scott campaign and sent Rachel to Dunbar Gardens to film the man who would become Little Rock's first black mayor. Her footage is remarkable. It's lit low, the action is slow, and shows Scott working the parking lot for last-minute votes. It is not intimate with the candidate but nor should it be. Tim, at Cajun's Wharf, captured good and useable footage of the Kurrus party, with the candidate being interviewed by KATV.

At the Sabin party, I visited with a few of the volunteers I met that afternoon, filming as they refreshed the voter returns being updated on the Secretary of State's webpage. The candidate, his wife, and Brian, the campaign manager, stayed at home, waiting until the results became clear. When Warwick arrived, he did a brief remote for KATV before working the room. Within the next hour the near-unthinkable happened when, Sabin, considered the safest bet for office, was named last in the three-way heat: a massive disappointment for the publisher and politician. The final vote tallies would be Scott (25,146), Kurrus (19,668), and Sabin (19,157). Two outsider candidates, Vincent Tolliver and Glen Schwarz, would net 2,024 and 1,788 votes, respectively. Gregory arrived, obviously distraught, and sat with his friends, also shocked, at a table abutting the sound booth. As his buddies began to encourage him and bolster his self-esteem in the aftermath of the loss, I knew this scene would become essential to this story.

Meanwhile, Patrick Rodgers was able to film the soon-to-be Mayor Scott at his party at Copper Grill. The energy of this party versus the others was self-apparent. Away from the noise

Patrick was able to capture a great moment outside the restaurant with a voter emphasizing the importance of the black vote. Patrick was able to work his way through the packed crowd to get a couple minutes of Scott accepting his victory that night and rallying his troops for the run-off vote to come. By 11:30, everyone's work was done so we met up at White Water Tavern to close out the long day, toast the project, and set up a workstation in booth in the back of the room to copy over everyone's data from the night.

### **BUILDING OUT ELECTION DAY**

The following morning, I wasted no time in getting the Premiere Pro project set up and everyone's files organized in bins. I clicked through a few scenes and started to realize that the Election Day footage could work as its own, smaller project.

After a few weeks away from the footage, I returned to the project in February 2019. Logging the footage, I came to realize that yes, this would be its own project and not part of 88.3 which had a strong ending already that, in retrospect, I didn't want to jeopardize. After putting together a couple minutes of video that fell flat, I put all of the new footage from KABF aside and focused directly on voting and Election Day. Recreating the space and energy of such a consequential day had always been more appealing than relaying a beat-by-beat account of the election results. I decided to do an experiment with three channels of video and audio playing at once, three simultaneous and overlapping places and conversations moving through the course of one day, and I pieced together a seven-minute proof of concept reel that I posted on my Vimeo.

The following month, I went to Chicago to workshop 88.3 at film at Kartemquin. One of the biggest takeaways I learned from that experience was that I would be well-served to trim down the more durational moments in 88.3 while still exploring that aesthetic (and medium-specific artistic tool) in *Election Day* where it is a dominant, not supplementary, mood. While I

was in the city, I spent a day at the the Art Institute of Chicago which, coincidentally, was showing a three-channel documentary while I was there, Naeem Mohaiemen's *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, about two failed Socialist third world programs of the 1970s. Feeling emboldened and with a fresh reference for what three-channel documentary can look like, I began working on *Election Day* on the train ride back to Arkansas.

Working with three simultaneous channels of video in the timeline presented unique challenges from beginning. I didn't want to make any breaks in any of the frames where, say the center frame would go out and the story would play on the wings, or the two screens would be left- or right-aligned (as in Kane's *A Time to Play*, or John Akomfrah's multi-screen work). So much of the scene depended on luck to have the right lengths of footage balanced between the three frames throughout the timeline. Measuring out lengths of footage and arranging them in different ways was a constant balancing act and took a nail-biting bit of faith for all three channels to remain active.

There was no doubt that the movie would play out chronologically, and I was shocked at my luck when the movie sat comfortably split between day and night segments. Contextualizing the nighttime scenes at the election night parties was key, and the footage from KATV was essential in narrating the moods of the night.

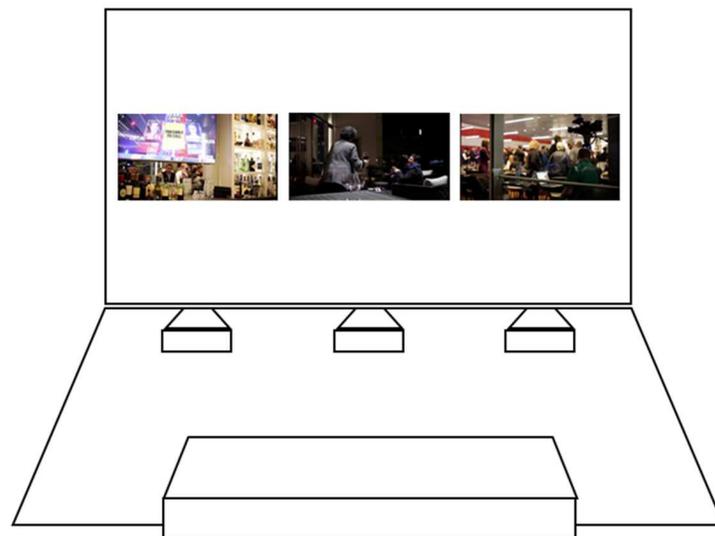
In most cases, the intimacy of a scene depended on the quality and immediacy of the footage that was captured by myself and the four other shooters. While reviewing footage in light of my determination to make a bottom-up portrait of this election cycle, I knew that my footage taken with gubernatorial candidate Jared Henderson and mayoral candidate Warwick Sabin, would stay on the cutting room floor. Although plentiful and intimate, I felt it would overshadow the overarching populist arc of the film. Our images of political victory with Kurrus and Scott

are distanced while our experience of Sabin's surprise loss is intimately felt through his campaign manager, Brian Gregory, at the end of the movie.

## **EXHIBITING ELECTION DAY**

This project was created for galleries and meant to be exhibited as a loop, with each of its three channels projected by in a darkened gallery with three close-pitch projectors, one for each channel, horizontally along a wall, with two-channel stereo sound. The three channels of 1080 x 1920 combined represent dimensions 1080 x 5760, or roughly a 5.33:1 ratio. Stereo sound can be outfitted to match the space and projection size can be scaled to accompany allotted wall space.

Benches should be made available for the audience as well as ample standing room for people who want to only watch portions of the movie. Although it was created as a loop to be freely walked in and out of, its total length (43:30) can also be scheduled around 45-minute showtimes.



*Election Day* is a series of discrete vignettes and lends itself to gallery exhibition where viewers are free to enter and exit as they wish. It is an observational-participatory work built

recreating a spatial and social event, inviting the viewer to immerse themselves from a sensory standpoint while moving their expectations for political media from an app or a cable news station to a dedicated art space.

Because COVID-19 has moved all movie exhibition online, it may be decades until this is screened in a public space as intended, so I anticipate this film making its debut on computer screens. This is fine with me although there will be salient differences in the audience work involved in watching on a single monitor and watching over three projections. On a computer screen, *Election Day* will lose the intended life-size scale of projected images and instead be seen in individual frames about half the size of a postcard; the three frames will be visually negotiated by flitting the eye across a screen instead of swiveling ones neck to focus on individual frames across a wall. That said, by limiting the visual scope to a computer screen all three frames can be optically processed easier as a single unit of visual and auditory compliments and juxtapositions.

## **CONCLUSION**

My first four years of documentary work have happened completely in the context of regional film. By embracing the confines of independent filmmaking in Arkansas as liberating instead of limiting, my aim has been to produce compelling, progressive, formally-challenging, non-fiction work in a regional vernacular with no budget to speak of and no producers to appease.

These documentaries have all been economic statements asserting that anyone can, with a consumer grade camera and an Adobe subscription, realize their cinematic vision. *Election Day* takes this economy of filmmaking to a logical extreme by emulating Abel Gance's technically and financially demanding Polyvision and liberating it from the constraints that kept it from being adopted during its invention.

Although I'm extremely proud of the final product and the work and thought put into it, I don't expect this film to make any impact beyond Arkansas and honestly don't see many people in Arkansas being interested in it, either. That said, it has been priceless as a personal filmmaking and storytelling exercise and an attempt to create the exact sort of film I'd like to see made. It is a wandering, anti-plot video work that may be of its time in subject but is out of place in its form. *Election Day* is first and foremost a chronicle of local history made to be screened decades from now. More than immediate recognition, I hope this film will age well and be useful as a visual, social document of our shared civic history during a fraught, unsure time.

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