

Bakhtin's Polyphony in Documentary Film

This essay will discuss how “polyphony,” a term borrowed from musical theory by the literary critic and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, can be successfully applied to documentary film. An alternative to character-centric storytelling (the pervasive mode favored by the documentary distribution and funding community), polyphony allows filmmakers to tell complex stories about systemic issues that defy easy categorization or solutions. The three films discussed here are the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Sabine Gruffat and Bill Brown's *Speculation Nation* (2014), and Brett Story's *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* (2016). Each film demonstrates, in its own way, how polyphony is not only relevant, but also compelling when applied to documentary film.

Deriving from the Greek, the word polyphonic means “many sounds.” Polyphony, in music, is “the simultaneous combination of two or more tones or melodic lines.”¹ In literary terms, Bakhtin has provided a comprehensive definition of polyphonic when discussing the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. In his seminal work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky is the first Western novelist whose characters are truly polyphonic, in that his characters are not guided by an omniscient voice of the author or in the service of an overarching argument to be made, but instead are equal in relation to one another and each equally important. Bakhtin wrote, “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels.”² Whereas character-centric storytelling focuses on evolution and development of one or more characters and their psychological development, Bakhtin argues, Dostoevsky's polyphonic storytelling focuses on a snapshot of a moment in time, highlighting how characters respond to a given situation without focusing on growth or psychological insight. While character-driven storytelling often adheres to a three-act structure, providing a sense of closure and resolution at the end, the polyphonic storytelling in Dostoevsky's novels has an open structure, more likely to raise questions rather than provide answers. In Dostoevsky's novels, the world and its characters are depicted in a constant state of becoming.

Handsworth Songs, directed by John Akomfrah and produced by Lina Gopaul of the Black Audio Film Collective (founded in Portsmouth, England, in 1982), examines the

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “polyphony,” by Mark DeVoto, www.britannica.com/art/polyphony-music.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

riots in Birmingham's Handsworth district in 1985, which were sparked by friction between the police and the local ethnic Afro-Caribbean minority. *Handsworth Songs* approaches these riots in at times a poetic, at times a stark, perplexing, and provocative manner. Archival footage, television coverage, experimental soundscapes, music, and voice-overs create a fractured narrative reflective of the chaos and unanswered questions exposed by the riots. Instead of an authorial voice or a consistent cast of characters, *Handsworth Songs* presents a polyphony of voices, sounds, and images—more reflection of rather than bearing witness to the riots, more critique of media coverage than media covering the event.

The title, *Handsworth Songs*, already suggests an intermingling of multiple narratives—it is not just one melody we are about to hear, just like we are not following one narrative of the riots and events leading up to it, but many. The polyphonic interweaving of many different voices and points of view, none privileged over another, deconstructs linear representations of historical and political events. As the critic Dagmar Brunow observes, “Rather than presenting a mere counter history to the dominant media discourse, *Handsworth Songs* questions media images and their function in constructing ‘reality’ while at the same time defying notions of truth and authenticity.”³ Instead of creating a counternarrative, the filmmakers critique the narrativizing of historical and political events overall.

At the beginning of the film we see Douglas Hurd, Britain's home secretary from 1985 to 1989, walking through the Handsworth neighborhood, talking to largely white residents while a voice-over states:

It's the eleventh day of September 1985, and the Home Secretary is standing in a Handsworth street, with confused eyes. The masses saw him struggle for composure and they heard him mutter to journalists: “These are senseless occasions, completely without reason.” Somebody said behind him, “The higher the monkey climb, the more he will expose.” [quoting a Jamaican proverb]

Later, a voice-over states: “Between [Margaret] Thatcher's ‘Swamping’ speech and the Falklands expedition lies another melodrama of consent: the war of naming the problem.” *Handsworth Songs* utilizes footage of television reports and newspaper headlines to expose and undermine the validity of hegemonic media narratives.

The soundtrack, influenced by reggae, punk, and the postindustrial noise movement, often contradicts or renders ambiguous what we see or hear in the spoken words. A politician professes to be clueless about the causes of the riots and stresses the “nice atmosphere” of an encounter he had in the affected neighborhood. But the soundtrack is ominous and foreboding, and, together with shots of policemen in heavy-duty riot gear, undermines the politician's assertion. At other points, the soundtrack creates a bridge between seemingly disparate elements, such as shots of statues of scientists James Watts and Joseph Priestley intercut with an eerily waving mechanical clown. There is no

3. Dagmar Brunow, *Remediating Transcultural Memory—Documentary Filmmaking as Archival Intervention*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 137.



Still from *Handsworth Songs* (1986) by Black Audio Film Collective.

immediately obvious connection between these shots, but the apocalyptic music and crowd sounds create connection in an intuitive, almost dreamlike way, as if to say that history and politics are not always linear or logical.

The inclusion of visual art by contemporary Black artists adds another layer of meaning to *Handsworth Songs*. Intimate portraits of members of the Black community in Handsworth, taken by Black Birmingham photographer Vanley Burke, feature prominently in the film. A mural, painted by Gavin Jantjes and Tam Joseph, depicts scenes inspired by the Afro-Caribbean experience in Britain after World War II. In the film the mural is filmed in fluid intuitive camera movements, mostly in close-ups, creating a very personal feel. These art works provide an insider perspective of the Afro-Caribbean community—a contrast to media images of the riots, depicting Black residents as outsiders and dangerous perpetrators of violence.

At one point a female voice-over recounts an encounter between a journalist and a woman who is observing the riots. While looking at images of a policeman standing guard on the street, we learn that the journalist was “pestering” this woman to get her opinion on the disturbances. The voice-over continues: “She looks at him calmly and replies: ‘There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories.’” This sentiment—that there are no stories—is a theme that runs throughout the entire film. “Explanations create a link between past and present and the illusion of a continuum. Explanations persist, like burdocks they burr themselves into the fabric of our collective understanding,” another voice-over tells us. Instead of explanations and developments, we

are provided with contradictions and a kaleidoscopic view of the moment. Featured characters are not used to bolster pre-existing arguments (explanations) but stand on their own. The viewers are asked to make up their own minds. In the words of Nigerian journalist Ann Ogidi, “*Handsworth Songs* presents a scrapbook of evidence, of multiple scenarios and possible answers to that, and leaves the storytelling to the ghosts.”⁴

While *Handsworth Song* uses polyphonic strategies to open up one event—the 1985 Handsworth riots—to a much larger discourse about representation and history, *Speculation Nation* by Gruffat and Brown is polyphonic in that it depicts a wide range of situations as a snapshot within a moment in time, specifically the crash of the housing bubble in the early 2000s in Spain. Much like characters in a Dostoevsky novel, the people in *Speculation Nation* are presented, in the words of Bakhtin, “on their own terms, in their own voice, according to their own ideas about themselves and the world.”⁵ We meet young mothers and their families squatting in a failed condo development, getting water from a faucet down the street; occupiers in caves overlooking Granada, coping with the moistness of their dwelling; protesters who have created pop-up camp sites in front of bank branches; activists who work with the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (La PAH, a Spanish grassroots organization fighting against evictions and for housing rights). The focus is not on analyzing how the people Gruffat and Brown meet ended up in these situations, but on how their situations in the present are playing out. While looking at a long tracking shot of an abandoned airport, Brown’s voice-over muses,

During the financial crisis in the US, everyone talked about the exotic financial instruments that triggered it. Collateralized debt obligations, default swaps. But what does an exotic instrument look like exactly? In Spain the financial crisis isn’t so abstract. It’s a place you can visit. It’s a half-built building you can sneak into, and a road to nowhere you can drive down, and a fully built airport you’ll never be able to catch a flight out of.

One important accomplishment of *Speculation Nation* is demystifying the financial obfuscations and making the housing bubble visible and very real—a polyphonic snapshot of a moment in time.

Gruffat’s and Brown’s voices guide us through different situations and personal encounters with the people they befriend as they are traveling through Spain. The effect of having two voices guide us through the film rather than only one is profound. It personalizes the filmmakers’ experiences and makes us see the unfolding events through each set of eyes. It also lessens the effect of a hierarchy that a single voice-over can have. As Bill Nichols explains in the article “The Voice of Documentary,” “the direct-address style of the Griersonian tradition (or, in its most excessive form, the ‘Voice of God’ in the March of Time’s newsreels) was the first thoroughly worked-out mode of documentary.” Nichols then elaborates that the purposes of the direct address style were “overwhelmingly didactic . . . employ[ing] a supposedly authoritative yet often

4. Ann Ogidi, “Handsworth Songs,” *Voice Thrower*, March 17, 2014, <https://voicethrower.wordpress.com/2014/03/17/handsworth-songs/#more-3105>.

5. Bakhtin, *Problems*, 7.



Still from *Speculation Nation* (2014) by Sabine Gruffat and Bill Brown.

presumptuous off-screen narration.”⁶ *Speculation Nation*’s voice-over, in contrast, is neither didactic nor authoritative. With both voices equally present, a dialogic space is opened, undermining the effect of an all-knowing “Voice of God.” For example, at the beginning of the film, Brown states,

Sesena [a bleak, underoccupied housing development 30 minutes south of Madrid] is the poster child of everything that went wrong in Spain. . . . When we visit we’re expecting an abandoned ghost town. So we’re a little surprised that here, like anywhere else in Spain, we can still get a *cerveza* at a bar and a cute dress at the flea market.

This reveals Brown’s distinctive point of view and his poetic sensibilities. A third voice-over—that of the architect Isabel Concheiro, providing historical context throughout the film—helps keep the film focused on the larger picture of the crisis. But this voice-over is also far from didactic or lecturing: when Concheiro talks, we hear both filmmakers interject and ask questions. This way, although Concheiro is certainly very knowledgeable, she does not come across as a disembodied voice of god, but as another important independent voice in the film.

One never feels like the people depicted in the film are reduced to sound bites or are neatly edited to make a larger point. Instead, we are presented with a mosaic of independent voices and views. In one segment we see young mothers outside Seville cleaning a condo that they have occupied. Gruffat’s voice-over states that these women are “cleaning house—this is what they want us to see,” simultaneously reinforcing the subjective point of view of the filmmakers and the agency of their subjects.

The camera work in *Speculation Nation* reflects the empathetic and respectful approach of the filmmakers. Individual people and communities are shown in long shots,

6. Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 17.

never giving viewers the feeling that the filmmakers might be intruding into these communities or voyeuristically exploiting their troubles through close-ups. Details, such as Gruffat helping draw a protest poster, or scenes of the filmmakers mingling with others, clearly reveal their allegiance, but their empathy never overshadows the overall systemic analysis. The wide shots of people engaged in protest or occupation are interwoven with beautiful tracking shots of abandoned housing developments or other failed or failing constructions (a deserted airport, an underutilized amusement park), accompanied by a haunting soundtrack by Stephen Vitiello, visually and sonically connecting the disparate manifestations of the crisis to create a more expansive analytical framework.

Speculation Nation ends on the streets of Valencia on the last night of “The Falles,” an annual festival in honor of Saint Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters. Different neighborhoods construct sculptures around timely themes, which are burned at the end of the festival. In one neighborhood, residents choose the theme of “banks,” using the double meaning of “bank” (also meaning “bench” in Spanish) to create a fantastical sculpture of benches representing different Spanish banks. The film ends with a jubilant carnivalesque burning of these sculptures for thousands of onlookers. *Speculation Nation* does not offer any closure in individual stories (as a character-driven documentary might), but a snapshot of a moment in time of the collapse of the Spanish housing market, as well as a powerful critique of the capitalist practices that helped create it.

The third film, *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* by Brett Story, provides the final example. Like *Handworth Songs*, *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* suggests its polyphonic approach already in the title—a lack of hierarchy with twelve equally important landscapes. Also like *Handworth Songs*, *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* incorporates archival footage (of Detroit in 1967) into its portrait of the present. Similar to *Speculation Nation*, *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* presents a snapshot of a moment in time, showing how people of different economic and cultural backgrounds are affected by a troublesome and complex social institution, in this case the United States prison system. The film depicts twelve distinctive locations across the US, providing a nuanced view of how the prison industry has permeated every aspect of life. There is an ex-prisoner in Washington Square Park in New York City who, unable to find more steady or lucrative employment, earns extra cash as a chess player. A resident of Wheelwright, Kentucky, hopes that the closed penitentiary there will reopen, because the town has struggled ever since the coal company left and as he argues, “Prisons are recession proof.” We listen to the testimonial of a prisoner who is made to work as a firefighter, facing extraordinary dangers with little pay or acknowledgement. In the Bronx we meet the brother of a prisoner, who started a company offering food and other items that adhere to the complicated guidelines of goods that can be mailed to inmates. “When I sent my brother [a] package, maybe 10–15% [of the contents] were not approved and [were] thrown in the garbage. So I really saw a need,” he explains. In Baltimore we meet communities roiled by weeks of tense protests after the April 2015 death of Freddie Gray, and in St. Louis County, Missouri, where the Ferguson protests took place after the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014, we meet several residents, almost all Black, who stand in line to pay outrageously high traffic tickets for minor or non-existing offenses. One of the most



Still from *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* (2016) by Brett Story.

touching interviews is with a Missouri woman who ended up in jail because her garbage bin lid was not put on properly. She was told that, unbeknownst to her, she already had a previous warrant and that therefore she needed to pay \$175 to avoid going to prison. She says, “I worked hard for my money. I’m not going to give it to you for a frickin’ trashcan lid. So I went to the police department to turn myself in.” After three days in prison she changed her mind: “I said fuck it, I’ll pay the damn bond. They said I couldn’t buy myself out. That was the point I was fed up with the system.” In testimonial after testimonial, we learn how a capriciously sadistic system is chipping away at people’s dignity and agency.

Each new location is introduced with shots of the landscape and the people in it. We see the bustling Washington Square Park, the strip-mined hills of Kentucky, the empty streets of Baltimore during a curfew. The filmmakers take their time to introduce each environment, to really let viewers absorb the specificity of each place, creating a strong interconnection between landscape and people. In *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* people are not represented as heroes or villains in charge of their own destiny independent of where they are, but as interdependent beings shaped by the environments and systems they happen to be living in.

Story explains her desire to move away from character-focused narrative:

I was interested in using cinematic form to consider the workings and wreckage of a regime, not tell a sentimental story about guilt or innocence, but as a result I found very little traction for its production. I pitched the film at meetings, I described it in grants, I talked about it at festival networking events, and at every pivotal moment, the same question: Yes, but where is the *story*?⁷

7. Brett Story, “How Does It End? Story and the Property Form,” *World Records Journal* 5, Article 11, worldrecordsjournal.org/how-does-it-end-story-and-the-property-form.

She critiques the prevalence of character-driven stories in today's documentary landscape for its individualism and lack of systemic analysis, likening the construction of story to the construction of the property form:

The story form as it is most commonly heralded—owned, belonging, contained, resolvable—does useful work for capital recuperation precisely because it dovetails with the individualism at the heart of neoliberal capitalism and the property form alike. The hero, the resilient individual, the villain, the charity case: these are all variations on an already existing and pernicious ideological preference for the individual over the social, the “character” over the condition, experience over consciousness.⁸

The Prison in 12 Landscapes, like *Handsworth Songs* and *Speculation Nation*, does not rely on the construction of heroes and villains to draw viewers in, but instead presents a world of unresolved contradictions, interdependence, and multiple coexisting narratives.

In her 2019 essay “When the Hero is the Problem,” Rebecca Solnit writes, “The narrative of individual responsibility and change protects stasis, whether it’s adapting to inequality or poverty or pollution.”⁹ The polyphonic documentary avoids these narrative pitfalls. The multivoiced, nonhierarchical approach gives many different subjects a chance to be seen and heard, even if they contradict each other’s views. The snapshot of a moment in time highlights the immediacy of the issues. And the open ending leaves viewers with questions that need to be answered—a good place for an audience to be after having watched a film. In the words of Bakhtin, “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.”¹⁰ *Handsworth Songs*, *Speculation Nation*, and *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes*, each in their own way, provide a powerful illustration of this collective, polyphonic search for truth in nonfiction filmmaking. ■

DOROTHEA BRAEMER is a filmmaker and an assistant professor in media production at Buffalo State University.

8. Story, “How Does It End?”

9. Rebecca Solnit, “When the Hero is the Problem,” Literary Hub, April 2, 2019, <https://lithub.com/rebecca-solnit-when-the-hero-is-the-problem>.

10. Bakhtin, *Problems*, 110.