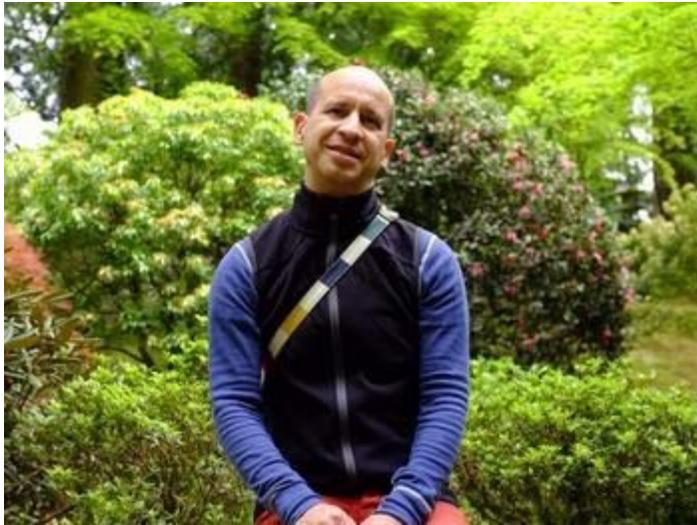


In Memoriam - Professor Jonathan Kahana



January 3, 2020

The Department of Film and Digital Media is deeply shocked and saddened by the loss of our colleague, Professor Jonathan Kahana, after a protracted battle with a rare form of cancer. Jonathan passed away on December 31, 2019 at the age of just 53. Professor Kahana joined the faculty at UC Santa Cruz in 2012 after spending several years at New York University; before that he taught at Bryn Mawr College after receiving his PhD from Rutgers University. His arrival at UCSC came shortly after the launch of our PhD program in the critical practice of film and digital media, a program on which he has had a profound and lasting effect. He was an accomplished scholar, teacher, and public intellectual, and we are bereft at the huge gap he leaves in our intellectual and personal lives and in the life of our department.

Professor Kahana was the author of *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (2008) and the editor of *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism* (2016). The publication of *Intelligence Work* decisively established Professor Kahana as one of the most significant and innovative scholars in the field of US documentary film. The book examined a range of documentary modes, from capital-intensive, widely-circulated works of state propaganda and mainstream film and television to the ephemeral, hand-made productions of radicals, artists, and amateurs. Kahana argued that all can be said to perform, in one way or another, “a similar intelligence work, by making visible the invisible or ‘phantom’ realities that shape the experience of the ordinary Americans in whose name power is exercised and contested.” The book staged a vital dialogue between the fields of cinema and media studies and critical theory, grappling with enduring questions about the place and form of intellectual work and what constitutes public-ness.

Kahana's edited volume *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism* continued his contributions to documentary and its role in public life and is, by any measure, a monumental achievement. Clocking in at over 1000 pages, the collection assembles both primary and secondary texts including essays, reviews, interviews, manifestos, letters, and ephemera from a huge range of sources. Professor Kahana not only rescued hard-to-find writings out of historical oblivion, but also shone a light on non-Euro-American writings and writings on avant-garde documentary practices, thereby powerfully reshuffling the field of documentary studies. In his general introduction, and in introducing each of the book's seven sections, Professor Kahana situated his curated texts in their historical context and provided interpretive introductions that offer ways for readers to reflect on the history and evolution of documentary forms over the past hundred years. But this extraordinary collection was never intended just for critics or scholars: noted Canadian filmmaker John Greyson wrote a back-cover blurb for Kahana's *Documentary Film Reader* that rhapsodised on the work and concluded, "Every aspiring filmmaker should keep a copy in her backpack."

The recognition of Professor Kahana's influence on students, scholars, and filmmakers alike is well noted. In his scholarship in and beyond these two books, Professor Kahana often formed deep intellectual dialogues with filmmakers and artists. His collaboration with multimedia artist Zoe Beloff led to two publications, an interview on Beloff's staging of Brecht's play *The Days of the Commune* and a small booklet with a dialogue on media activism in the contemporary moment. He published a conversation with filmmaker Liza Johnson on her film *South of Ten* and, with his partner Jennifer Horne, conducted an influential interview with famed documentary makers Harun Farocki and Jill Godmillow. Professor Kahana often brought filmmakers into dialogue with our students, too: UCSC's Center for Documentary Arts and Research (CDAR), which he founded, fostered many enlightening exchanges between students, faculty, and artists. A regular at the annual Visible Evidence international documentary conferences, Professor Kahana directed the 2011 Visible Evidence conference in New York City, the year before he began teaching at UCSC. With three hundred participants present from twenty-five countries and a program of screenings, workshops, keynote talks and performances, and social events, Kahana was in his element, fostering debates, dialogues, and dinners.

Professor Kahana had a profound impact on the work of many of our graduate students, teaching core courses in the PhD and MFA, as well as seminars on issues related to documentary. Here, he often connected his research to his seminars: for example, he offered a seminar on the documentary interview and another on the topic of re-enactment, the subject of the book he was working on at the time of his death. Even with his undergraduate courses, he managed to bring research questions to bear on our core curriculum, modeling for students the way to ask the most fundamental questions, including: "what is documentary?" His syllabi--undergraduate and graduate alike--show that he was never content to settle on teaching or investigating a *topic*; his skill was to model and enable modes of thinking, investigation, and scholarship. He advised a great many students in our programs, and his former advisees have gone on to tenure-track positions as professors while also earning international awards for their visual work. Even after moving to UCSC, he continued to chair the dissertations of former

students at NYU, one of whom won the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Dissertation Award, the top dissertation prize in our field.

As his colleague, we saw these intellectual and pedagogical tendencies regularly in our interactions with him. Just as his scholarly writing is characterized by profound critical engagement and careful deliberation--the ability to enact [what his friend and former colleague, Dana Polan, has termed "deep reflection and productive illumination"](#)--so too were his contributions to the life of the university. Never content to stop at the easy answer, Kahana would often pose the tough questions that many of us were too scared or reluctant to ask, sometimes in elaborate, perfect prose in lengthy, witty email messages that raised the bar on what that medium can do as a form; as other friends have pointed out in reflections after his death, one always had to bring one's best game when corresponding with Jonathan. In such exchanges, Kahana exhibited a generosity of spirit and commitment to intellectual life both within the university and in its relations with diverse publics, which he often reached with his work.

For those of us lucky enough to enjoy Professor Kahana in social life beyond the department, we also mourn an emigré Canadian, new citizen, lover of cats, aficionado of good tea, swimmer, cyclist, fashionista, foodie, and sports fan. We also remember him as the devoted partner of our colleague, Professor Jennifer Horne, who asks that we consider donations in his memory to fund research on ALK+, the rare cancer that he fought since 2017.

<https://www.supportalcf.org/alk/researchforjonathan>

We hope to organize a memorial event in the department in the future and will post details when we can.

Jonathan Kahana, 1966-2019

Friday, Jan 3, 2020

From: <https://tisch.nyu.edu/cinema-studies/news/remembering-jonathan-kahana> by

Dana Polan

Professor



Jonathan Kahana at the Visible Evidence conference.

My friend and former department colleague, Jonathan Kahana, has passed away after a fight with lung cancer. When he was recruited to UC Santa Cruz, Jonathan asked me to write a recommendation on his behalf. I didn't want Jonathan to go but I *always* want what is best for my friends, and the UCSC appointment for him and his beloved partner Jenny Horne, was a wonderful opportunity. Jonathan was so happy in Santa Cruz, professionally and personally, and he flourished there. The following comments derive from the letter I wrote for him. That letter doesn't account for Jonathan's profound accomplishments since he left NYU in 2012, but I wanted to say something right away about Jonathan and his scholarly contributions. To bring Jonathan's accomplishments more up to date, I've interpolated some lines from John Belton, one of Jonathan's earliest and beloved mentors, who wrote on his behalf for Jonathan's proposal to the NEH for his project on screen reenactment and the work of the past, *Going Through the Motions: Screen Reenactment and the Work of the Past*.

Jonathan Kahana was a friend of mine as well as a cherished partner in on-going intellectual exchange. I first met him when we had both just been hired by NYU (and were about to begin our positions there, along with mutual friend Dan Streible), and from the start I was struck by Jonathan's combination of sharp critical thought and affable enthusiasm. In fact, in the case of Jonathan, I feel in large part that I welcomed him as a friend because it was so easy for me to respect him as a thinker with great commitment to the life of the mind and great ability to manifest that commitment in productive dialogue and scholarly work. Much of what I liked about him personally connected to the profound admiration I had for his sharpness of mind and his intensity of insight.

Jonathan conducted all his academic endeavors with deep reflection and productive illumination. He made important contributions to scholarship in film, media, contemporary critical thought, and connected areas. Jonathan enjoyed a world-wide reputation as one of the very best historians and interpreters of non-fiction modes of visual communication. His breakthrough study on the form, *Intelligence Work*, in very short time attained virtually classic status as one of the key works for the field and, to my mind, it has not been matched in depth and breadth by any subsequent research by other scholars in the field. Combining meticulous archival research – on both documentary itself and on the discourse around it of the critical establishment – with a sharp understanding of the political economy behind documentary industry, Jonathan basically revolutionized the study of this important area of cinema.

At the risk of simplifying the far-reaching arguments of a book with many important stakes, I would say that *Intelligence Work* set out to examine how key works from the history of American documentary worked to make visible consequential and often fraught issues of contemporary life and address ordinary citizens in the byways of the world around them. The title, as Jonathan clarifies, alludes to Walter Lippmann's (in)famous assessment of the role of media in democracy and his assertion of the need for experts – workers in the realm of intelligent reflection – to mediate political ideas and everyday citizenship. Jonathan's goal was to address Lippmann's idea critically and examine the extent to which documentaries offer top-down pedagogy or can, in contrast, constitute a form of popular, democratic knowledge that arises from citizens themselves. Central to Jonathan's argument in *Intelligence Work* is the notion of "allegory," typically thought of as a strategy of works of *fiction*, but employed by Jonathan to capture something particular about the workings of *documentary*. Specifically, Jonathan argues that documentaries may, by nature of their origin in a photographic medium, render the facts of a specific here-and-now but in the best of cases they transcend that specificity by allegorical interpretation that asserts broader implications around particular events. Jonathan thus sees the documentaries that he deals with as both specific and general, and this grants them their especial power in the public realms (from movie theaters to television channels) where they are exhibited. As Jonathan asserts, his volume is a contribution both to cinema studies in particular and to American studies more generally, insofar as he is concerned to pinpoint the social and cultural roles key documentaries have had in airing and articulating pressing concerns of U. S. political and personal life. Toward this end, his volume offers readings not just of films but of

myriad forms of American cultural expression, from the popular press to government documents to works of literature.

Additional marks of his reputation in the area abound: for instance, a major independent distributor, Image Entertainment, commissioned him to write the liner notes for the DVD edition of the important Emile de Antonio non-fiction film, *Underground* (1976). Likewise, Oxford University Press commissioned him to put together a reader of primary texts from the history of non-fiction film. Such a volume was much needed and is now the go-to anthology for documentary studies.

In recent years, Jonathan elaborated a series of upcoming projects, several of them book-length. The breadth of these projects – from the role of witnessing in film to the sonic and aural dimension of visual media to performance issues in cinema – attests to an energetic engagement in scholarship of a very promising and committed sort, so tragically cut short.

From John Belton: "Jonathan's long-standing interest in documentary film, especially contemporary (i.e., post-World War II) documentaries, led him to the mode of reenactment as a topic for his next book. Reenactment has always been an integral element of the documentary from the early reenactments of the Battle of Manila in the Spanish-American War (*Tearing Down the Spanish Flag*, 1898) to classic documentaries such as *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film that was re-staged after director Robert Flaherty's original footage, shot in 1914-15, was accidentally destroyed. As Jonathan noted, reenactment in documentary, once a staple of the genre, fell into disrepute in the 1960s with the advent of *cinema vérité* and its emphasis on the observational recording of events as they occurred. It was the reemergence of the reenactment mode in the late 1980s that caught Jonathan's attention. This reemergence can be seen most dramatically in Errol Morris's *Thin Blue Line* (1988) which reenacts crucial events from the often conflicting perspectives of different witnesses, and in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, as exemplified in ABC's infamous docudrama *The Path to 9/11* (2006), which was widely criticized for its historical inaccuracies and for the inclusion of events that never occurred. Jonathan's argument links the revival of this mode to a variety of factors, ranging from cultural anxieties about representing traumatic events of the recent past to the ultimate unrepresentability of those events (as is the case with certain films about the Holocaust). Caught between a desire to represent and the fear that any representation they might make would necessarily be false, filmmakers resorted to reenactment, a mode which acknowledges its own status as a representation. This, in turn, leads Jonathan to the notion of irony, the dominant mode of address that characterizes these films. As he so succinctly put it, 'reenactments are reluctant derivations of reality that resist truthful, prepossessing expression, and . . . irony is thus the pervasive trope of reenactment.' This, in turn, has political consequences that distinguish contemporary works of reenactment from those of the classical and pre-classical era. Jonathan thus quotes Hayden White's *Metahistory*, noting that irony 'tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions.' I find Jonathan's thesis extremely perceptive, providing a fascinating account of the contemporary documentary's recent turn from its traditional appeals to the real to more modern and postmodern notions of the

impossibility of any real. Jonathan also saw this turn as a solution to the so-called 'digital dilemma.' If the advent of digital imaging and its potential for infinite manipulability undermines any possibility of an indexical relationship the image might have with its referent (and thus, as Jonathan put it, the image's 'purchase on truth'), the turn to reenactment, which acknowledges the image as a simulation, can more effectively express the 'truth' of digital imaging—which is a form of simulation—than can traditional analog imaging. As a result, Jonathan's book, as he himself noted, 'positions moving-image reenactment *between* truth-telling and fictive or fantastic modes of representation, a mode that can be found across the entire range of moving-picture forms of the twentieth century, from historical narrative to documentary, propagandistic and instructional forms to experimental uses of film and video.'

It is important to note that Jonathan produced this important and consequential body of scholarly work while giving much of his time with great enthusiasm and energy to his teaching and to university and disciplinary service of a deep and varied sort. His intellectual investments in program and curricular development were deeply impressive. Already, as a former director of the Bryn Mawr film studies program, Jonathan came to NYU with great awareness of curricular issues in cinema studies and of the role of close mentoring of students in a field that, within the larger university context, has had often to struggle for academic legitimation. Jonathan's courses for us were marked by rigor and seriousness of purpose (as a minor example, he was famous for a deep commitment to building student writing skills that manifested itself in extensive comments on papers that went well beyond the 'call of duty' around the correction of writing). As one mark of the regard with which students hold him, Jonathan was nominated for a Tisch School of the Arts teaching award.

For 2007-2008, Jonathan served as the department's Director of Undergraduate Studies and took as part of his mission to enable our *graduate* students to be better teachers of undergraduates through a series of pedagogy workshops he organized. Since his arrival at NYU, he served importantly as the department's liaison with Anthropology for our joint certificate in Culture and Media that enables students from each department to engage with cutting edge work at the edge of ethnography and moving image media.

One example of Jonathan's service to the field at large was his work for the nominating committee of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the primary professional organization for the field. Famously, Jonathan initiated and implemented a major rethinking of terms and term-limits for officers that has led to more effective, more productive administration of the society.

Always, Jonathan was an engaged and engaging scholar and his enthusiasm impelled students to engage in productive interchange. Jonathan clearly understood that the best and most useful research takes place as part of an ongoing pedagogical intent in which the results of one's efforts matter only insofar as they are shared with others, offered up to a public for reaction and inspiration. Through his wonderful balance of scholarship and pedagogy, Jonathan served as a

great model of the scholar committed to research's contributions both to the disciplinary field and to the public at large.