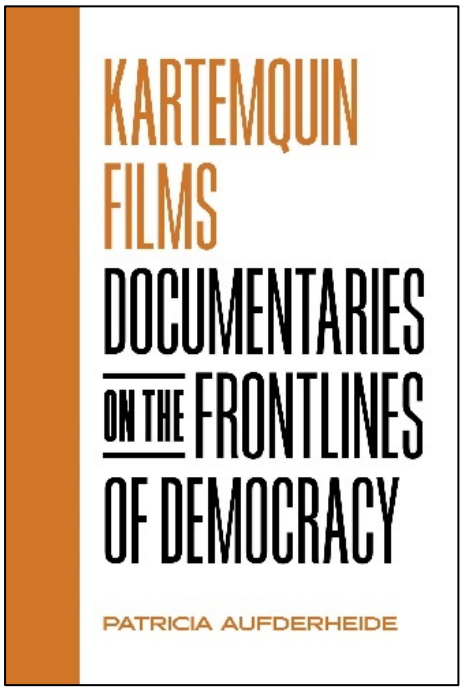
International Journal of Communication 19(2025), Book Review 2031–2033 1932–8036/2025BKR0009

Patricia Aufderheide, **Kartemquin Films: Documentaries on the Frontlines of Democracy,** Oakland: University of California Press, 2024, 360 pp., $27.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Emily Coleman
King's College London




***Kartemquin Films: Documentaries on the Frontlines of Democracy*** is Patricia Aufderheide's meticulously researched biography of the independent documentary production house, who have been making social-issue films in the United States for almost six decades. Kartemquin—best known for films such as *Hoop Dreams* (James, 1994), *Life Itself* (James, 2014), and *Minding the Gap* (Liu, 2018)—has enjoyed phenomenal critical success, having been honored with Emmy, Sundance, and Peabody Awards, as well as several Oscar nominations. Yet, as Aufderheide points out, the story of the organization itself has often been sidelined by journalists and scholars, who remain focused on the role of "auteur" directors. This, she argues, is a significant oversight. By documenting the struggles and successes of this culturally significant production company, Aufderheide is able to demonstrate how the changing media landscape of the past sixty years has been both reflected and contested on screen.

Launched in Chicago in 1966, Kartemquin's mission was to use the power of the media to create a better informed and more open society. At a time when the documentary tradition gravitated toward the overtly educational and didactic, Kartemquin was instrumental in developing a more curious and engaged style of character-led filmmaking, which has proved hugely influential in shaping the documentary genre we are familiar with today. Never simply interested in making film but also "making change with film" (p. 17), their early productions focused on "notoriously unsellable" subject matter, from caring for the elderly (*Home for Life* [Temaner & Quinn, 1966]), to the politics of childbirth (*Marco* [Temaner & Quinn, 1970]). Despite securing premises in Lincoln Park—then a blue-collar suburb that later became gentrified—and successfully winning commissions, they frequently encountered conflicts of interest with funders. No matter how committed they were to telling the truth through their films, not everyone wanted to hear it.

In chapter 2, Aufderheide explores the influence of Dewey and Gramsci on the founders' philosophy, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" to enable an understanding of the flows of power that condition the realities of this type of work, influencing what stories get told and by whom. Mostly, however, the book follows a chronological structure, building a production history based on numerous interviews with Kartemquin's founders, filmmakers, and associates, as well as ethnographic observations and archival research. Aufderheide also shares a long personal association with the company, as a "fellow dreamer for a stronger democracy" (p. 15), a lifelong friend of artistic director Gordon Quinn, and eventually—as the

organization evolved from a ramshackle collective to a national media institution—a member of their board of directors. Unapologetically, Aufderheide's perspective is far from that of a neutral observer, but her proximity offers her unique access and positions her to tell this fascinating story in a way that no one else could. By shifting the focus toward the circumstances of production, the emerging tale becomes less about any of the individual films that Kartemquin has produced over the years and more about what it has taken for them to survive as an organization—as Aufderheide puts it, this is "a story about the challenge of producing documentary for democracy at a time when democracy itself is imperilled" (p. 250).

Despite Kartemquin's reputation for groundbreaking work, the company has never achieved financial stability and has relied on the goodwill of committed filmmakers, determined to follow their dreams and willing to subsidize their work with second jobs or the investment of their personal savings. The lack of adequate budgets often led to dysfunctional working conditions, with people working unpaid and family members drafted in to act as crew. In one memorable anecdote, a sewer pipe in the dilapidated company headquarters froze during a particularly bitter winter, and the lack of funds to fix it meant that staff members had to either rely on a sidewalk Portaloo or hike down the road to the local bar to borrow their bathroom facilities.

It took until the 90s for Kartemquin to produce their breakout international hit, *Hoop Dreams*, widely regarded as one of the best documentaries ever made. *Hoop Dreams* follows the stories of two teenage basketball players struggling against poverty and racism to follow their dreams of making it in the NBA. The film showed ordinary people "carving out spaces of dignity in their lives" (p. 3) and exemplified Kartemquin's mission at its best—as a "tool for democratic discourse" (p. 7) but also an "art form." Behind the scenes, *Hoop Dreams* (James, 1994) also remade the terms of engagement between filmmakers and their participants, offering their protagonists an unprecedented deal to share the profits, which not only included the people who were filmed but also their impoverished families, who still continue to receive royalty payments more than thirty years later.

*Hoop Dreams* (James, 1994) focuses on lives of young Black athletes but was made by an all-White production crew. Director Steve James' hopes of being able to recruit African-American crew members were frustrated because of insecure financing, and here—as in several other points in the story—Aufderheide shows how precarious working conditions serve to exclude marginalized people, leading to Kartemquin being dominated by White men regardless of their progressive intentions. One of most interesting sections of the book documents Kartemquin's more recent attempts to decolonize filmmaking practices through diversity schemes, with uneven results and unintended consequences. Graduates of their program reported feeling like "diversity tokens," and found their fellowships did not always translate into sustainable careers.

Beyond their credit list, Aufderheide highlights Kartemquin's important work off camera in pioneering the fair use of copyright material in service of free speech, building mutually supportive filmmaking communities, and mentoring emerging talent. Their legacy lies not only in their productions but also in the approach that the people who worked there carried through with them into the rest of their careers. As one former staff member who left to work in Hollywood said, "There were things I couldn't stand, because Kartemquin had given me a compass" (pp. 293–294). Ultimately, while rich in intricate detail, this story raises bigger questions about the potential of culture to create societal change—and why, in practice, this is so difficult to achieve. Today, with Kartemquin's survival as uncertain as it ever was, the reader is

prompted to consider how vital organizations like this are and what it would mean for society if they disappeared. Evoking Dewey once again, Aufderheide reminds us: "An engaged public is all that keeps democracies democratic" (p. 291).

This is an enjoyable and accessible book, which will be read not only by scholars but also filmmakers and documentary fans. It contributes to important debates about the purpose and value of culture, highlighting the impact of mechanisms such as financing and distribution on storytelling practices. But perhaps Aufderheide's greatest achievement is in preserving an important story—one which could so easily have been lost to history—about the odds faced by social-issue filmmakers and why their work remains on the margins of mainstream culture.

## References

James, S. (Director). (1994). *Hoop dreams* [Film]. Chicago, IL: Kartemquin Films.

James, S. (Director). (2014). *Life itself* [Film]. Chicago, IL: Kartemquin Films.

Liu, B. (Director). (2019). *Minding the gap* [Film]. Chicago, IL: Kartemquin Films.

Temaner, G., & Quinn, G. (Directors). (1966). *Home for life* [Film]. Chicago, IL: Kartemquin Films.

Temaner, G., & Quinn, G. (Directors). (1970). *Marc* [Film]. Chicago, IL: Kartemquin Films.