

## **‘Documentary Studies’: Dimensions of Transition and Continuity**

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Over the last 30 years there has been a huge growth in the study and critical analysis of documentary and an increase, too, in the variety and conceptual ambition of ways of thinking about it. Until the 1990s, this can be seen as the steady development of recognition, within film and media studies, of the social and cultural importance of the documentary project and of the intellectual interest which attention to its history and forms offer. From the mid 1990s, this development has been accelerated first of all by the phenomenon of ‘reality television’, selectively drawing on documentary precedents, and then by the emergence (especially in the United States) of ‘feature documentary’ success in the cinema. Although the first of these shifts was widely seen as indicating the displacement and even the ‘death’ of documentary and the second as a possible ‘renaissance’ of it, to put the situation like this is to be unduly simplistic.

For some, ‘reality television’ brought a welcome freshness and increased openness to the business of documentary representation. It is also clear that a number of the most successful ‘feature documentaries’ draw selectively on the structures and aesthetics of reality shows (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Touching the Void*, *Capturing the Friedmans* and *Super Size Me*, for instance, all having their different linkages), while not being simply reducible to this model.

So the rethinking of documentary has partly occurred as a result of dynamics within the intellectual sphere, including an increasing focus on the conditions of ‘representational’ truth and an extension of aesthetic and discursive inquiry well beyond conventionally fictional forms (as seen, for instance, in the growth of critical work on biography, travel writing and historiography). But it has also been driven by the nature of changes in non-fiction practice itself, taking the object of study in some new directions, including a more central positioning within media culture and popular culture, and making the presence of ‘documentary’ on the research agenda and university syllabus less marginal than before.

In this chapter, I want to chart some of the lines of connection, tension and disjunction that hold the developing field of scholarship and criticism together, if sometimes only loosely. This is not a literature review of documentary studies and my citations will mostly be indicative,

intended to recognise major contributions and characteristic approaches, and those only selectively.

I want to start by outlining the situation as it seemed to me in 1976, when I first started to teach documentary in a degree programme and to search for work that could inform my approach. From this account of a particular moment, I then want to move through some of the principal conceptual themes and concerns that have worked to shape the field since, a shaping that has involved relationships both of transformation and continuity.

### **The moment of the mid-1970s: Refining the terms of analysis.**

The moment of the mid-1970s provides a productive point of departure for my account for reasons stronger than their autobiographical significance. The period between 1971 and 1976 saw the publication of major formative work in the development of documentary as an area of academic inquiry. In the United States, Lewis Jacobs, Roy Levin, Alan Rosenthal, Richard Barsam and Eric Barnouw all published books about documentary in the four years from 1971, providing a lasting basis of scholarship.<sup>1</sup> In Britain, Jim Hillier and Alan Lovell's 1972 volume Studies in Documentary (Hillier and Lovell, 1972) gave critical emphasis

to the importance of the documentary idea in British cinema. However, against this background I am particularly interested in two commentaries published in 1976 that quite radically departed from previous work in the way they posed documentary as an object of study. There were precedents, for sure, but I want to argue that these publications represented important shifts in thinking, directing us towards an agenda that is still active. One of the texts was British, Dai Vaughan's Television Documentary Usage a 36 page pamphlet published by the B.F.I in its successful 'Television Monograph Series' (Vaughan, 1976). The other was from North America, Bill Nichols' article 'Documentary Theory and Practice', published in Screen (Nichols, 1976). Although very different in intellectual tenor, both had a common interest in pursuing questions of documentary's textuality, including its grammar of representation, a good deal further than most previous work had attempted to do.

However, before giving these two contributions some close attention, I want to go back four years earlier to Lovell and Hillier's Studies in Documentary, published in Secker and Warburg's 'Cinema One' series. This was the first volume to engage exclusively with British documentary and one of the first published anywhere to treat documentary as worthy of close textual study. Its publication combined with the concurrent impact of Jacobs', Barsam's and then Barnouw's defining historical accounts of an international cinematic form (in the last

two cases, that of ‘Non-Fiction Film’) to give the whole area greater academic visibility.

The book is divided into three main sections, each one concerned with what is called (perhaps a little misleadingly) an ‘epoch’ of documentary. The first is on the documentary film movement of the 1930s and centres on critical exposition around the ideas and practice of John Grierson, the second focuses on Humphrey Jennings and the third on the ‘Free Cinema’ movement of the 1950s, including the work of Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz. In retrospect, this might seem an odd structure – with ‘documentary’ effectively appearing to stop with the waning of the ‘Free Cinema’ movement at the end of the 1950s, notwithstanding the subsequent impact of the ideas of this movement on a broader range of cinema and television. Television’s developments, particularly the huge shifts and achievements of the 1960s (for instance, in observational work, drama-documentary and ‘current affairs’ formats) are almost completely out of the frame of reference. In part, this can be explained by the remit of the book within a ‘cinema’ series of short studies, but its effect upon the placing of ‘documentary’ as a practice is undoubtedly distorting, making the whole account ‘historical’ in perspective and tone without an explicit argument for it being so.

Despite this sense of documentary as essentially an achievement of the cinema of the past (documentary as, by implication, ‘over’) the book

achieved its goal of making British documentary work more widely appreciated as part of the broader aim of gaining greater critical respect for British cinema. It is its second section, on Humphrey Jennings, that begins significantly to open up a closer analysis of formal structures. This section (written by Jim Hillier) is by far the largest of the three and its explorations, stimulated by Jennings' aesthetic originality, closes in on localized detail and on rhetorical organisation in ways that are suggestive for the critical scrutiny of documentary more generally. For instance, a lengthy discussion of Fires Were Started includes two double-page shot sequences to illustrate sustained passages of close analysis that are far removed from the kind of brisk thematic and formal summaries found in the broader, 'film history' surveys. It shows critical examination closing in on documentary's fascinating and powerful modes of textual management in ways that would quite quickly be taken further.

Vaughan's 1976 text stands out against the established background immediately. First of all, in sharp contrast to Studies in Documentary, it is, as its title declares, a book entirely concerned with documentary as a television form, noting on a preliminary page that 'almost all serious documentary is now produced for television', a comment that, at the time, was not necessarily true outside of Britain, certainly not in the United States, and might now need some review in respect of Britain itself. Nevertheless, Vaughan's emphasis represented a significant extension

and revision of the established cinema-based agenda for serious discussion of documentary. Again in contrast to Studies, it is a book about documentary ‘now’ not documentary ‘then’, documentary is something vigorously happening, not an object of retrospective assessment. A third distinguishing characteristic is the intensive focus placed on documentary texts as ‘artisan’ constructions of meaning, relatively independent of attention to the specific social topics that they address. With his wide experience as a film editor, one might have expected Vaughan to adopt the approach and language of those ‘how to’ manuals which had already appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. However, although he drew deeply on his experience in the editing room, Vaughan’s originality lay in the conceptual energy he brought to bear on close exploration of the ‘syntax’ of documentary in the context of the pressing questions of ontology and epistemology which non-fiction representation posed.

Looking back on the book after an interval of over 30 years, I think the way in which it is structured by a positive sense of the possibilities of ‘verité’ is even more apparent than at the time (the chapter on ‘verité’ is by far the longest). For Vaughan, the absorption into television of the influences of observational film-making and modes of cine-verité, together with the availability of the new lightweight cameras and sync-sound, offers exciting potential for a ‘re-definition’ of the entire

documentary enterprise. Specifically, it offers the possibility, wholly positive for him if problematic for others, of relating strongly to individual rather than general truth and of thereby getting deeper, specific and more sustained connections with particular realities. In this way, he thought, documentary might move away from what he terms the ‘mannerism’ of conventional styles (to a degree inherited from the 1930s), with their ‘appeal to predictability’, their ‘reliance on cliché’, their constant trading on expectations.

Deploying a language occasionally at risk of losing its clarity to its theoretical ambition, Vaughan uses the idea of the ‘putative event’ (the event as it might have been without the camera’s presence) against that of the ‘pro-filmic’ (what was actually before the camera) to work across a number of examples of contemporary observational practice. However briefly, he is also keen to position the audience within his framework of analysis. How do they accord status to what they see unfold? What kind of interpretative work is encouraged through watching the observational documentary diegesis develop (its apparently self-contained spaces, times and conditions of action)? What responsibility should viewers’ have for working out their own meanings from what they see and hear rather than (as in the modes of ‘mannerism’) depending upon strong guidance from the film-maker? His commitment to the ‘opening up’ that observational formats offer is reflected in his final anxieties about the subversion of



their capacities to document that a re-introduction of commentary and captions is likely to bring.

Vaughan's zealous championing of the documentary's new possibilities for productive ambiguity, for registering with a fresh energy the density, complexity and contradictions of actuality, is undertaken in full recognition of the paradoxes and indeed 'absurdity' that all documentary aspirations involve. It is by no means an exercise in the naïve or the unquestioningly naturalistic, as some defences of observationalism have risked becoming. It relentlessly pursues a set of questions about the grammar of television documentary practice, many of which have become more relevant rather than less with the debates about 'reality television' that were only to start 20 years later. To many of us teaching documentary at the time, Vaughan's spirited analytic push into television's symbolic densities was one to be followed, even when his allegiance to observational modes did not entirely convince.

Nichols' 1976 article shares with Vaughan's a new level of commitment to close, conceptually informed, analysis. While with Vaughan it is the excitement of working as an editor within new forms of observational practice that provides the stimulus, with Nichols the initial framing is political, the challenging of *documentary as ideology* in a context of neglect. 'The ideological smokescreen thrown up by documentary apologists, many of them ostensibly leftist' is put forward

as one of the reasons for this neglect (34). Documentary is a category of ‘illusionism’ in pressing need of critique, an area of practice where the idea of the ‘screen as window’ is at its most pervasive. The article sees its task as ‘confronting the challenge of realism’ thus presented. In this respect, it has to be read within the context of the wider questioning of ‘realism’ that was a dominant strand of film studies at the time, often working with a sense of irremediable deficit and a search for ‘alternatives’.<sup>2</sup>

Given the advantages of hindsight, it is hard not to identify a measure of vanguardist foreclosure in these opening pages, documentary seen first and foremost as the candidate for some overdue downsizing. In fact, what follows (to be variously developed in Nichols’ subsequent writings) is a highly original, subtle and suggestive account not only of documentary *limitations* but of documentary *possibilities*.

Taking as his main corpus of examples the work of the U.S. radical film group ‘Newsreel’ (including films made by them and films they distributed), Nichols works his way through a tight typological scheme for studying documentary as a textual system. Within this scheme, influenced by various concurrent writings on ‘film as system’ (including work in the journal Screen), documentary is seen to be grounded in the logics of exposition. These logics involve various forms of address, direct and indirect, sync and non-sync, a complex (indeed, dual) idea of diegesis

relating both to narrative and to expositional development, and strategies of sequence construction and linking. The 'Newsreel' films raise, for Nichols', acute problems regarding the promoting of the sound track to a position of dominance, particularly through commentary. 'Newsreel' seeks to use commentary to further enforce the relationship between film and reality, precisely the kind of transparent relationship that Nichols regards as central to the 'ideology of documentary'. 'Characters' also often have speaking parts in the film, typically as interviewees, and Nichols is alert to the way in which they may be used (in a manner resembling the deployment of commentary) to provide a mode of rhetorical management for the images, one that is frequently suspect in its claims-making. Here, following a line that would be developed in his later writing, he notes the variety of ways in which participant speech can be combined with deployment of images, including images of the participants themselves. He observes how the films of the 'Newsreel' group rarely undercut visually the statements of their interviewees, unlike some of the radical work of documentarists like Emile De Antonio.

Nichols' reflections are guided by his attention to the deficits in a particular body of 'left' independent cinema, whereas Vaughan is primarily concerned with an increasingly popular strand of television. Yet their suspicion of modes of discursive management, particularly that of image by direct-address speech, are interesting to compare and suggest

that for Nichols, with his commitment to the 'expository' idea, the distortive potential of speech has to be challenged within the context of its recognised indispensability, whereas Vaughan's 'observational' emphasis places speech other than 'overheard' speech as secondary at best. Of course, the Nichols framework is explicitly political, whereas Vaughan's is only implicitly and partially politicised. Both are concerned with the preservation (or indeed, introduction) of a strong vein of complexity in the screened representation, connecting Nichols' discussion to the project of 'experimental cinema' at a number of points and Vaughan's to what are perceived as the inherent ambiguities and incoherence of ongoing reality itself. Finally, both raise questions about the positions taken up by the audience. Nichols' final subhead is 'The Viewer's Place in the Exposition'. Here, he clinches his sense of the deficiencies within the 'Newsreel' approach, a weakness common to many political film-makers, 'a tendency to ease aside the distinction between the argument (the textual system) and the referent (the real conditions)' (47). Allied to this unproblematised realism, he notes how there is an assumption of unified and coherent subject positions, positions from which viewers seek out knowledge from a film and integrate it within consciousness. Nichols questions this assumption and, in a way that links with broader shifts underway in literary and cultural theory, looks towards less unified forms of invocation and towards methods that

introduce a ‘disturbance’ of viewing subjectivities. Again, Vaughan’s own concern with *not resolving* documentary referentiality into something entirely precise and ‘contained’ provides an interesting comparison, if one from a very different starting point.

Nichol’s article came near the beginning of his writings on documentary, which were to become, internationally, the most significant body of scholarship on documentary we have, with a major impact both on teaching and research. Already, some of the key themes to be elaborated and revised in the later work are established. These include the interest in typological thinking that would quite soon (Nichols, 1983) lead him to articulate a schema of documentary form (initially, fourfold – direct-address/expository, *verité*/observational, interactive and self-reflexive) which, in its various revisions, has been subject to discussion ever since.<sup>3</sup>

In their contrasting framings of television and of independent cinema and in their shared concern with the micro-process of documentary in relation to its larger ambitions, both pieces provided inspiration. The division between those who focus on film and those who focus on television continues to be a significant factor in documentary scholarship, of course, raising important issues of institutionality as well as of cultural practice, even allowing for the growing number of researchers and critics engaging with both.

‘Ideology’, however, is no longer the confident, pivotal term it was within the film and media studies of the 1970s. Problems of sustaining a coherent theorization that could be applied in analysis, together with broader shifts in the political framing of cultural practice, have been factors here. Nevertheless, questions of power, knowledge and subjectivity remain on the agenda of documentary studies, and I shall suggest below that a more general ‘rethinking’ needs to achieve further development here. The reduction in scale of the ‘ideological question’ seems to me to have brought advantages, insofar as a more comprehensive appreciation of documentary history and practice, not emphatically tied to notions of deception and a framing attitude of suspicion, has produced a productively more complex and aesthetically expansive sense of the object of study. Documentary achievements and the continuing strengths of documentary production become more recognisable and open to inquiry within this frame, without the whole perspective thereby shifting from unqualified critique to unqualified affirmation.

I want now to consider some important themes in the subsequent development of inquiry and debate by using three headings – Definitions, Aesthetics and Cognition. These are inter-related, sometimes a little messily, but they give my discussion focal points by which to gather together a clearer sense of the broader pattern.

## **Debating Documentary: Three Areas of Dispute**

### 1. Definitions.

For some writers on documentary, the question of definition has been central, with failure to find an adequately tight set of generic criteria confirming their view that the documentary enterprise is fundamentally suspect. However, for many others 'loose' definitions have been acceptable, with documentary seen to intersect across the junction points of a number of media modes and to be in the process of steady, continuous change. It is clear that a certain level of stability is required for documentary to be an adequate label for identifying films and television programmes as of a 'similar kind', but this level is one that can admit more contingency and variation, indeed a measure of contradiction, than scholars in search of an isolable generic system are often able to accept.

Exploring questions of definition, a number of points of reference emerge, variously guiding or blocking the conduct of dispute. There are attempts to stabilize documentary around matters of form, matters of subject and matters of purpose. Not everyone would agree with the use of these particular terms but my aim here is merely to differentiate broadly

between types of definitional argument, not to prescribe a particular analytic vocabulary.

Proceeding by primary reference to **form** runs immediately into the problem of the very wide range of forms that documentary has employed, with little direct linkage between, say, many of the classic films of the 1930s, television documentary journalism, and the range of observational styles now in use. Stylistic connections *do* run across this vast body of work, it is true, but often only in partial and interrupted ways. Writers who have decided that the classic Griersonian style, strongly led by commentary, is ‘core’ documentary (either affirming the model or subjecting it to critique) have to ignore the considerable amount of international work that departs radically from this broad recipe. Those who, more recently, have taken varieties of observationalism to be ‘core’ (quite often, again, a ‘core’ to be challenged) have had to ignore not only much of the ‘classic’ work but also a whole rich tradition of television practice which extensively uses presenter address and interviews. Since the history of documentary shows such a variety of forms, including modes of dramatization in which actuality footage and sound is minimized and even excluded altogether, a formal stance on the definitional question does not get us very far. However, it is not surprising that formally-based models of documentary have regularly been employed (if sometimes only with caution) by academics, since



trying to advance generic understanding by reference primarily to formal criteria is an established and often productive analytic route in other areas of literary, art and film scholarship.

**Subject matter** may seem an even more unlikely point of primary reference given the numerous topics and subjects which documentaries have addressed, yet it is clear that topic has a degree of definitional sensitivity within documentary studies if not always within the broader spheres of documentary production and documentary viewing. ‘Serious’ topics and, particularly, ‘social problem’ topics, have acquired core status here, quite understandably given the strong tradition both in the cinema documentary and in the varieties of television documentary of engaging with issues of national, and sometimes international, public (civic) significance. Documentaries with other kinds of content, including work on the arts, leisure activities, wildlife and on geographical themes (until the recent emphases on environmental degradation and climate change) have not been excluded but they have been put on the periphery so far as critical attention is concerned. Yet any attempt to tighten up a sense of documentary, whether with descriptive or prescriptive intent, by the criterion of subject/topic is likely to provide a stiff challenge. This is so even though the established precedent of work engaging with serious social issues will continue to act for many as an implicit but strong marker of ‘documentary value’.

A third option is to emphasise documentary **purposes**. What is documentary work *trying to do* with its variously produced and designed portrayals of parts of the real historical world? Here, a key fault-line in debate can be discerned. For documentaries designed primarily to give pleasure, or to entertain, have routinely been seen to depart from ‘documentary values’, whatever the apparent connections with these values at the level of forms and even of broad content. This has been most obvious in the debate about ‘reality television’, where it has precisely been the idea of the purposes and then the consequences of the television industry’s production of ‘commodity diversions’ that has been questioned against the commitment to public knowledge and to critical scrutiny perceived to be central to the documentary project. If we interpret ‘purposes’ broadly they can be seen as a factor in production *method* (particularly the time spent on research and the working protocols for relating to, and ‘using’, participants) and also in *mode of address* and *tone*. ‘Purposes’ become an over-determining influence on ‘treatment’, producing potentially very different kinds of programme using the same broad formal repertoire and perhaps engaging with similar subject matter.

However, to try to secure a definitional argument around purposes would be unwise. First of all, they have been very different in specific character, even within a category description that emphasises seriousness

and knowledge (what Nichols (1991) has famously called the ‘sobriety’ of documentary as a discourse). They have ranged from forms of promotion and propaganda (a category always available to offset against ‘documentary’ as discussion of Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* has recently shown) to the many forms of journalistic inquiry and through to radical and sometimes reflexive explorations.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, in many disputes about what is and what is not a documentary, or what is low in ‘documentary values’, it is likely that matters of purpose as they extend to treatment (and therefore connect finally with questions of form and subject) will be primary points of reference, even if not openly admitted to be such.

## 2 Aesthetics.

Although I have given it separate consideration here, the study of documentary *aesthetics*, of the forms and techniques of imaginative creativity and the pleasures and satisfactions these generate, has not surprisingly been strongly framed by an interest in *cognition*, in how documentaries construct and project knowledge and the likely interpretation and use of this by viewers. As I noted above, within the early work of Bill Nichols there was a preoccupation with the structures

and mechanisms of ideology, the concept itself providing a primary reason and context for documentary study. However I also noted how a sense of the discursive fascination of documentary, together with the allure of its quest for ‘the real’ (theoretically suspect though this quest might be) often emerged in analysis too. Documentary presents more difficulty than fictional cinema in eliciting critical ‘appreciation’, recognition of its crafting as *positive creativity*. First of all, documentary is self-declaredly in the ‘knowledge business’ in a way that most feature film-making is not, whatever its thematic engagement with ‘issues’. This relates it much more directly to the knowledge systems rather than the art-systems of society and places it more centrally as an object of epistemological and socio-political critique. Secondly, documentary is widely seen to lack the symbolic richness of narrative cinema both in its visual design and its textual organisation. Cutting through to its devices of illusion and deception poses an analytic challenge certainly, but one that does not require the kind of imaginative engagement and textual sympathy that fictional works elicited as a preliminary stage even in critical analysis that moved on to identify deficits and limitations.

It would be hard to quarrel with the general judgement that documentary discourse is, on the whole, lower in imaginative and symbolic complexity than screen fiction. Certain types of drama-documentary and the more self-consciously ‘styled’ documentaries (one

might, with some caution, speak of ‘art documentary’) would be at the higher end of a range, with many routine, competent exercises in documentary observation and reportage at the lower end. This has produced a situation in which scholarly attention from the perspectives of arts-grounded criticism has found it routinely more interesting to consider some kinds of documentary than others. The works chosen for attention have often provided ‘deep’ or ‘rich’ accounts for explication, textual enigmas to be taken up and perhaps contradictions to be pursued across what can be seen as their multiple levels and phases of aesthetic design (see Corner, 2000). ‘Documentary studies’ has thus often involved study only of *certain forms* of documentary, with the US dominance of the international field still giving cinema the edge over television and with much reportage still relatively ignored, although this situation is quite rapidly changing.<sup>5</sup>

Within documentary production itself, there has, of course, been a much-remarked tension between an emphasis on producing that which is pleasing, documentary as a creative artefact, and producing knowledge, documentary as a ‘message’, perhaps an urgent one, about the real world. Some tensions of this kind are apparent in the 1930s British movement, for example in the comments of Grierson.<sup>6</sup> Although it is easy to observe that these two dynamics of practice are not essentially contradictory,

recognition of potentially divergent priorities simply follows from looking at the history of work both in film and television.

We can perhaps distinguish two broad modes of the 'aesthetic' at work as analytic themes in documentary study. Pursuit of both has benefited from the continuing connection with scholarship on fictional cinema and television. First of all, there is the longstanding concern with the *pictorial creativity* of documentary, the organisation of its visual design and the 'offer of seeing' it variously makes to audiences, sometimes supported by music and often working in combination with modes of speech. Pictorialism is a continuing component of documentary practice, subject to further development and emphasis in recent work, although it has taken on a different and, one might argue, reduced form in observational accounts (where there is a flattening out towards naturalistic continuities) and in kinds of documentary journalism (where the tendency is towards a primarily illustrative function, often strongly literalist in support of commentary and presenter speech).

Secondly, there is an emphasis on the satisfactions offered by various modes of *narrative*, documentary as story-telling, including the investigative and revelatory dynamics often at work, as well as the distinctive forms of narrative structure employed in observational accounts and the direct alignment with fictional models produced in full dramatization.

Among international scholars, Michael Renov (see for instance Renov (ed.), 1993 and Renov, 2004) has made a major contribution to the study of documentary as involving a specific *poetics*, and as requiring critical appreciation for its imaginative and often positive appeal to viewing subjectivities. By giving attention to the ways in which documentary can enhance our sense of the world and in the process contribute to the enrichment of film and television as creative arts, he has provided some counter to the risk of documentary being ‘reduced’ entirely to its cognitive functions, defining as these undoubtedly are.

Further work on documentary audiences offers among its possibilities that of exploring more thoroughly the specific kinds of relationship between form, content and viewing satisfaction which many documentaries offer (Hill, 2007 is a major survey in this direction and Austin, 2005 offers an illuminating case-study). It is likely that development of our understanding of documentary as an aesthetic practice will feature significantly in any serious ‘rethinking’ of approaches and evaluations (for one suggestive approach, see Cowie 1999 and for a range of critical writing on ‘classic’ texts see Corner, 1996 and Grant and Sloniowski (eds.), 1998).

Cognition.

Questions of knowledge generation, quality and uses have always been central to the study of documentary, whatever the different emphases and approaches to inquiry (Nichols, 1991 is the defining account with Winston, 1995 and 2000 providing strong, historically-grounded studies with close attention to production contexts). If it useful to see documentary positioned culturally somewhere between 'news' and 'drama' (to take reference points within the television system) then just as aesthetics makes strong connections with drama, so cognition highlights the relationship with forms of journalism.

A longstanding issue in documentary analysis has been the kinds of truth-claim that documentaries make and the frequent overstatement or over-projection of these claims, producing a consequent requirement to challenge them. Of course, not all documentaries have wishes to present their accounts as unproblematic (some have drawn attention to their own uncertainties of status) but the majority have worked variously to offer representations that can be taken in 'good faith' as a resource for understanding the world. Some of the films of the 1930s British Documentary Movement went further than this. They were, in many respects, self-conscious exercises in 'propaganda', intended to persuade as much as inform and organised to achieve this end by the deployment of a strong rhetorical design.



Documentary journalism has worked with protocols of ‘truth’ of a different sort from the 1930s and wartime films. However, in seeking validation through the rationalist and evidential discourses of journalism, marked by its tones of cool, professional inquiry and appraisal but increasingly subject to critical interrogation as to its real disinterestedness and integrity of construction, its claims have sometimes become equally suspect if not more so than those of openly rhetorical film-making.

To some commentators (we can refer back to Vaughan here) observationalism seemed to eschew propositional claims of any kind in favour of models of ‘directness’ or a responsibility for attributing significance largely transferred from the makers to the audience. However, the simplicity of purpose and authorial ingenuousness apparently at work in the observational mode has provided recent documentary scholarship with its primary critical focus. This is particularly so if many of the forms of ‘reality television’ are seen to draw and adapt significantly from work in this mode.

Taking a schematic view, the agenda of inquiry concerning documentary’s cognitive profile (an agenda extending to connect with questions of intent and of aesthetics too) can be seen to involve two different, if related, planes of visual representation, regularly confused in debate and even in analysis.

The first plane is the plane of the *origination of the image*. Here, questions are raised, as they are in respect of photography, about the particular social ontology of the image and the conditions of its production. Longstanding questions of authenticity, concerning the possibilities of manipulation and trickery in the management of what is seen (and heard), have been joined more recently by anxieties about the deployment of digital reworking and even complete manufacture. Questions about origination are usually either about what actually was in front of the camera and/or about how the methods of filming (e.g. angles, framing, composition, lighting, filters) imported cultural value to its representation in the image. To use rather simplistic terms, how far was the image ‘captured’ and how far was it ‘constructed’?

The second plane is the plane of the *organisation of the image*. Here, the focus is on the editing together of different shots to provide various kinds of narrative and expositional continuity and then the combination of these shots with speech, including commentary, and sounds, including music. The epistemological and affective identity of a sequence of organised images and sounds is that of a *discourse* (an authored account, a descriptive version) rather than a *representation* as such, even though it is grounded in a sequence of representations.

Arguments about the adequacy to the truth of documentaries at the level of the origination of the image need to be differentiated from those

about adequacy at the level of organisation, but frequently they are not. For instance, it is quite possible for a documentary to assemble a wholly questionable account of, say, student poverty, from shot sequences each one of which has a strong degree of integrity as location footage with minimal directorial intervention. It is also possible for a documentary to have a high degree of integrity and truth value as an account of the same topic whilst containing some sequences in which the precise relationships of the apparent to the real, the local truth-conditions of the image, are open to serious doubt.

The stronger recognition of the play-off between matters of origination and of organisation might help to refine our critical engagement with documentary. The dominance of the ‘reality television’ issue in recent discussion of documentary internationally has sometimes encouraged the view that observational forms constitute the core of documentary practice and the core of its claims-making too. Such a position has undoubtedly served to misrepresent the full diversity of documentary portrayal, leading to a critical approach which proceeds as if what I have called factors relating to the origination of the image were all that needed attention.

Another, contrasting, focus for recent discussion has been the idea of ‘performance’, the kinds of self-conscious display of artefactual properties that can be a factor both of directorial and participant activity.

Forms of ‘reality television’, particularly those involving tightly formatted situations such as Big Brother, have presented us with modes of observation in which high degrees of self-consciousness and openly performative display to camera (both in speech and action) are routine. This has generated new lines of relationship with viewers, perhaps thereby eliciting new levels of empathy and complicity with screened behaviour. Certainly, such a clearly ‘knowing’ relationship between action and camera sets up different relations between screened events and viewers from that variously established through the modulations of documentary naturalism.

Some writers (Bruzzi, 2006 is a notable example) have suggested that a significant and welcome cognitive shift has occurred, freeing up viewing relations from the illusory grip of the established observational mode and perhaps even ushering in the possibility of a new ‘politics of documentary form’. Once again, only with new and imaginative kinds of audience research on the changing forms of the factual across a range of work are we likely to see just how far new, more self-aware and more sceptical viewing relations have actually been encouraged.<sup>7</sup> For it seems clear that many of the new ‘reality shows’, as much as they offer open performance to a camera whose presence is acknowledged, have also often traded heavily on the promise of the directness and ‘rawness’ of their depictions as modes of ‘captured reality’. Elements of reflexivity

and the recognition of artifice, have thus gone along with what can be seen as claims of transparency of a more traditional sort (Jersley, 2006 gives a shrewd analysis of contemporary documentary 'performance', at points taking issue with Bruzzi). Audience research might be also be able to assess the extent to which the frameworks employed by viewers in watching kinds of reality show (variously leading to positive engagement, dislike or outright critical rejection) are extended into the viewing of the broader range of documentary accounts (producing, for instance, increased interest in viewing or a deepened cynicism about the whole project of documentary portrayal). Many scholars would welcome a heightened public scepticism about all of televisual representation but most would also want to sustain conditions in which documentaries could still play their part in the construction and circulation of public knowledge, conditions in which documentaries could 'still count'. Documentary can be an idea around which scholarship gathers in scepticism but it can also be an idea around which scholarship offers a critical defence, contributing to terms of development.

Of course, a whole range of documentary output, including the various reportorial modes, has only a secondary connection at best with the problems of what attempting to be a fly on a wall brings to filmmaking and to the intensive and pivotal relationships between filmmakers, participant behaviours and viewer perceptions that

observationalism introduces. Although reality formats have modified the representational economy of documentary television in ways that have required address by most of those working within it, the different strands continue to require attention in their own specific terms of production, discursive organisation, 'claim on the real' and social impact. Precisely how documentaries attempt to access us to the world and to offer explicit and implicit propositions and judgements about it is still a rich and under-developed topic.<sup>8</sup> Research which not only pays attention to the cognitive profile of the different constituents of documentary representation but to the variety of 'knowledge-systems' which documentaries can employ, encouraging (and blocking) different ways of knowing and different kinds of knowledge, including emotional knowledge, is likely to be a rewarding line of further inquiry.

### **'Documentary': revision and development in an international field.**

The expansion of research and teaching interest in documentary shows both points of change and lines of continuity when judged against my marker of the mid-1970s. The sense of documentary as a broad area of practice under pressure from a changing media economy and from elements of the new audio-visual culture has certainly been a factor in

this expansion, giving added significance to a deeper engagement with documentary history as well as with contemporary work.

With simplification, some key dimensions of the overall pattern can be summarized:

1. There has been a quite decisive shift away from locating the study of documentary confidently within the critique of ideology. The inescapably 'cognitive' character of documentary, and its function within the political economy of public knowledge, has been placed within more subtle but also often politically more uncertain contexts of inquiry, ones in which contingent, empirical questions concerning conditions of production and reception become more relevant than was once allowed for. Along with this stronger 'sociology of documentary', an affirmation of documentary achievement and the continuing possibilities for its enabling of political and social development has more frequently been expressed alongside, and sometimes in combination with, perspectives of critique. A renewed focus on documentary ethics (relating primarily to production but with implications for conditions of distribution and viewing too) can be seen to have 'replaced' in part a more directly political framing. However, the requirement to locate film and television output within researched

settings of political, economic and cultural power needs to be a feature of any new phase of scholarship in the area, whatever the diversity of approaches and emphases this might entail.

2. A richer and denser sense of documentary aesthetics has emerged, enhancing our sense of the interplay between documentary representation and subjectivity (including the social subjectivities of national, ethnic and gender identity) and usefully complicating the engagement with documentary knowledge and documentary knowing. The stronger recognition of creative achievement, not only in the past but in concurrent work, that has followed this has linked a little more closely the spheres of scholarship and of media production, including production training, in ways holding further potential for dialogue and mutual influence.
3. It is much harder now to place an exclusive emphasis on cinema when studying documentary, particularly in countries where an indigenous documentary cinema is marginal if it exists at all. In many countries, including Britain, documentary television is an area of significant cultural work with a long and diverse history. Those approaches to documentary which engage with broadcasting primarily through the debate around 'reality television' are working with a framework likely to be severely skewed in its



understanding of documentary's scope, values and continuing potential.

4. 'Documentary' as a category of practice continues to change within the terms of the wider economic and cultural shifts. The intensified non-professional circulation of images of the 'real' brought about by web applications is a specific example of the reconfiguration of contexts, while the use of the web as a medium for professional documentary applications, both in support of film and broadcast material and independently, is developing rapidly. Across these changes, a degree of continuity with previous practice will be maintained but there are indications that a more radical process of 'generic dispersal' is at work across the whole area of the 'non-fictional' than has occurred at previous stages of development.<sup>9</sup> Even allowing for the historical resistance of the area to defining criteria, the use of documentary-style portrayals as forms of entertainment has significantly complicated our sense of what the term can now be used to signify. The newer deployments of actuality materials for purposes primarily of diversion have created changed conditions for constructing serious documentary accounts for a popular audience, combining with broader transitions both in the use value and the exchange value of representations of 'reality'. The recent successes of documentary in the cinema partly show the

application of strategies that try to take account of these conditions in order to keep recognisable ‘documentary spaces’ open.

A documentary studies that attempts to connect with the widest range of international practice both on film and television, including that within journalism and current affairs, will certainly be a more comprehensive field of inquiry than has existed hitherto. Study of documentary needs to be criticism, sociology and history (seeing emerging forms within the context of their lineage). Scholarship will never ‘resolve’ the issue of definitions and borderlines, these will actually become more uncertain and ‘thin’ as audio-visual culture becomes more inter-generically fluid. Suspicion of the uses to which some documentaries are put and the kinds of trust they elicit will rightly be a prominent element of academic engagement. However, a refined awareness of the aesthetic and cognitive complexity of the documentary process should accompany this. And so should an emphasis on the continuing value and *necessity* of many of the kinds of media practices that have been categorised under this rich but problematic heading.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> In rough sequence, the relevant volumes are Levin (1971); Jacobs (1971); Rosenthal (1972); Barnouw (1974) and Barsam (1974).

<sup>2</sup> The critique of ‘realism’ as an aesthetic of political limitation, denying spectator’s critical engagement with the world, is a major point of theoretical address in film studies from the 1970s

onwards. Although focused on fictional cinema, it variously impacts upon the (at this point marginal) attention given to documentary. Various alternatives, drawing on avant-garde practice, are recommended but there is also increasingly a developing defence of 'realist' work and its politics. See for instance Lovell (1980) and Juhasz (1984).

<sup>3</sup> Nichols (1991) becomes, of course, the major point of reference for the growth of documentary studies during the 1990s, collecting together and developing further the ideas put forward in the earlier essays.

<sup>4</sup> Among the recent commentaries around documentary and notions of propaganda see for instance Kelton Rhoads (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Conference programmes provide a good opportunity to assess the pattern of interests. As I noted earlier, the arrival of 'reality television' gave television a new prominence, if mostly with a negative inflection. More research on documentary journalism and other documentary applications is now being pursued although the arrival of a dedicated journal for the field with the title *Studies in Documentary Film* suggests the residual power of older perspectives.

<sup>6</sup> Hardy (ed.) (1979) shows variations in Grierson's own emphasis here, documenting his obvious fascination with matters of innovative film form and aesthetics alongside a sometimes rather brusque commitment to 'sociological' purposes. Grierson strategically veered around on the question of just how important 'form' was in relation to 'content', a quite understandable variation in someone attempting to gain support from a variety of people whose interests in 'documentary' were grounded in different priorities.

<sup>7</sup> Once again, Hill (2007) makes some important headway. Together with my colleague Kay Richardson, I tried to explore the difference between types of cognitive engagement with documentary material by using the terms 'transparent' and 'mediated' to describe levels of viewer awareness of the constructed character of documentary (and the selectivity informing this) as an intervening variable in relating to and assessing what was 'shown'. See Richardson and Corner (1986).

<sup>8</sup> For a much-cited account of the way that political engagement with a documentary can be explored see Gaines (1999) and for a recent study of the use of participant memory as a documentary knowledge source see MacDonald (2006).

<sup>9</sup> I have suggested elsewhere that documentary is now to some extent a practice taking place in a 'post-documentary culture', one in which the social and aesthetic co-ordinates that provided it with an adequate if loose generic identity have shifted. See Corner (2000 and 2004).

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