

Talking With Dinosaurs? Some reflections on the role of the documentary in screen production education



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Abstract

This paper reflects on the role of the documentary in screen production education and the implications for Australian screen educators of current debates about the form's place in the audiovisual schedule.

Today, our national documentary sector is considering its future and negotiating a landscape marked by the reorganisation and consolidation of the federal funding agencies, shifts in investment and taxation regimes, and technological challenges to accepted patterns of production, distribution and exhibition. As documentary makers stand at the crossroads between the state and the private sectors, national and international imperatives, divergent technologies, and the potentially conflicting goals of entertaining, informing and instructing, the paper asks: Is it time to reconsider the place of the documentary in the screen curriculum? Topics broached include: What is it? Who makes it? Who pays for it? How does it reach its audience? And how is technology transforming it? But the key question remains: Why teach it?

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Introduction

This paper grew out of a recent attempt to grapple with some of the challenges posed for Australian documentary makers by changes in the media landscape, nationally and internationally. As I foundered deeper in the morass of markets, policy, technological change and commissioning editor expectations, I wondered just what all this might mean for teaching documentary production.

One of the many virtues of ASPERA is that it opens a space for reflection on what is too often consigned to the 'business as usual' basket. I've been teaching documentary production for over 20 years and sometimes the speed of the academic assembly line seems to barely leave time to change the dates on the course outline let alone consider just what it is that we are teaching or why indeed we teach it. Not to mention how or why we might do it differently.

Once upon a time I taught a course called 'Documentary Genres' now I teach a course called 'Documentary Production'. 'Documentary Genres' was part of a major available to Bachelor of Arts students and I was on the staff of the Faculty of Humanities at Griffith University. That course, which was the second in a sequence of three, screened an historical survey of the documentary form from Flaherty, Grierson and Cavalcanti to Wiseman, Kopple and Rouch (plus local examples from John Heyer, Martha Ansara, Dennis O'Rourke et al). It also offered some limited technical and procedural training, and

asked the students to work in teams to produce a fifteen minute long documentary. Now I teach 'Documentary Production', a core course in the second semester, second year of a three year Film and Screen Media Production degree offered by the Griffith Film School. The course finds less time for screening the classics — three hour lecture/screenings are harder to justify in the current funding regime — and the various 'documentary genres' are introduced more through a series of technical workshop exercises dealing with observational shooting, filming an interview, using stills in a production, writing narration, poetic reconstruction etc. The students now work in groups of four to produce a ten minute doco and much of the 'teaching' takes place in a series of 'production group meetings' which mimic the contract requirements used by broadcasters with the meetings scheduled around milestones such as proposal, preproduction, rushes, rough cut, etc.

This shift might be partly explained by the change of context from Arts Faculty to Film School. But in truth these changes were underway before that institutional reorganisation, in part as a recognition of just what a single course might meaningfully contain, though mostly as a response to the student expectations that they be 'taught' how to make something rather than encouraged to appreciate and analyse a significant media form.

A Shifting Mediascape

So what are some of the changes in the mediascape that have had me thinking about the role teaching documentary production plays in screen production education? At a national institutional level the big one is the recent establishment of Screen Australia. The Screen Australia Bill establishing a new statutory authority 'merging the functions of the existing Australian Film Commission, the Film Finance Corporation Australia and Film Australia Limited' was introduced to the Australian House of Representatives on February 12, 2008. Subclause 6(3) of the Bill specifies that, as far as is practicable, Screen Australia should ensure 'the development of a diverse range of Australian programs that deal with matters of national interest or importance to Australians, or that illustrate or interpret aspects of Australia or the life and activities of Australian people'. The new organization should also place 'an emphasis on documentaries, programs of interest or relevance to children, and programs with a high level of cultural or artistic merit'.

On the face of it, this all looks like good news for our students as future producers of Australian documentary. But as we know, we operate in a global economy where, increasingly, the commodity rules, and the documentary cannot hope to avoid entirely these market disciplines. Indeed many have pointed to how the pressures for broadcast audience share and globalization are combining to convert the documentary from a film genre once devoted to public service and education into television programming that ranges from serious public affairs to TV 'reality' shows and 'docu-soaps' (Hogarth, 2006).

Not that factual production levels are in decline globally; indeed, the reverse is true. Reporting from the 2008 MIPTV television trade show in Cannes, Agence France Press noted that 'The growing global taste for programmes that roll out reality is currently so high that factual shows have become the second most purchased TV genre'. (Stuart 2008) At the same time, however, Nomadsland — a website for 'global social issue media' — lamented that documentary filmmakers 'survive producing formulaic spectacles about ghosts, meerkats or super-weapons'. (2008) And at AIDC 2008— where, according to Screen Hub, 'the one liner of the conference [was] broadcasters are bailing out of the single doc, in favour of the series' — the veteran commissioning editor at the ABC, Dasha Ross, wondered "is there a place in prime time for the traditional social observation documentary?" The ABC targets a magic figure of 700,000 viewers in prime time, and one-offs are not cutting the mustard' (Tiley 2008).

A further element prompting these reflections has been interaction with past graduates, many of whom have found steady work in various areas of factual television. While they have politely praised their student experience in the various Doco production courses, they have also been keen to point to the sometimes different skill sets — such as an understanding of departmentalized but concurrent postproduction workflow or a capacity to employ a more dramatized and directive interview/observational mode as a field director — demanded by their work on projects such as Outback House, Australian Story or Dog Borstal 2.

The Australian Screen and Contemporary Challenges to Documentary Practice

While the Australian screen industry is often treated as a scaled-down version of the American experience, the evidence suggests that, arguably, it is documentary production which provides the thread of continuity running through over a century of Australian filmmaking. The history of such production stretches from the groundbreaking 19th century work of the Salvation Army Limelight Brigade and Baldwin Spencer's pioneering ethnographic filming to the federal government Cinema Branch and its successors, the Commonwealth Film Unit and Film Australia. With the coming of television, these were supplemented by broadcast in-house production. (Laughren 1995) Since the 1980s, in-house institutional

documentary production has declined and an independent documentary sector has developed while, at the same time, the programming schedule used by television — which is still the primary commissioner and audience for documentary — has taken on an ever more decisive role as documentary makers shape their projects to meet the ‘slots’ available in the television program. In this model, documentary works increasingly become ‘products,’ created for the televisual ‘markets’. (FitzSimons 2002) Nonetheless, in Australia, the bulk of documentary production currently continues to win support not from the direct calculation of an individual program’s market profitability but for “benefits, such as the enhancement of a national culture, that may be generated as a market externality” (Papandrea 1997:66).

Of course, the story of Australian documentary production is one of change. Since Australia’s first film was shot in 1896, documentary producers have faced a series of challenges including the coming of the ‘talkies’, the advent of lightweight 16mm cameras and synch sound recording; and most recently the ‘digital revolution’. As the flyer for the doco2012: Documentary and the Digital Future seminar sponsored by Film Australia, put it,

The developments in digital media impact on everything we do: production, financing, distribution, narrative styles and access to audiences...How can the values of the documentary maker continue to be expressed? Will documentary survive in an era of social media where everyone with a mobile phone has the capacity to document their stories? What is the place of Australian documentary in this cluttered media environment – international, multilingual, interactive and personal?’ (2008)

While this digital production capacity might raise the democratizing possibility of citizen journalist empowered documentary projects, it also threatens a devaluing of the documentary product and budgets. And given the pervasiveness of the requirement for ‘overseas interest’ in the funding mix, how much longer will Australia’s national screen institutions be able to assert that:

Documentary production is in many ways a hallmark of a developed democratic nation. It is one of the most important means of creating a considered national record that extends beyond the reportage of news and current affairs. Good documentary programs interpret and contextualise, challenge and inform, inspire and entertain. They further understanding and provoke dialogue. Great documentaries promote democracy and leave a legacy (Film Australia 2008).

Documentary Values and the Value of Teaching Documentary Production

For most documentary makers a commitment to documentary is a commitment to the possibilities of testimony and discovery. Documentary is based on the proposition that ways can be found to document experiences which are actually happening or have happened to real people but which have been given scant public expression. The documentary maker’s art is to find those experiences, analyse and present them in such a way as to make them accessible to an audience. Unlike the ‘ambulance chasers’ of current affairs who must respond on the run to fast breaking or sensational stories and issues, quality documentary offers audiences well researched, reflective and engaging treatments of deep and long term human subjects. These documentaries can then empower the community to consider its democratic response to the questions raised.

Good documentaries reveal a realm of shared experience and enable us to recognise afresh a world we know, encounter and inhabit. Such documentaries illuminate aspects of this world for us, inform us about it, provoke or encourage responses and help shape attitudes and assumptions. Not only are there many types of and approaches to the documentary operating in any given period but the form itself has been constantly re-worked in light of new technologies for its production and distribution (Nichols 1991).

Perhaps the most widely recognised description of the form is the documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality”. A definition first proposed by the English documentary maker, writer and activist, John Grierson, in the 1920s. Grierson himself was adapting the French term “documentaire” which had been used to describe the brief and topical travelogue films which formed a staple of early cinema exhibition. (Grierson 1932) That Grierson’s understanding of the documentary as a ‘creative treatment of actuality’ remains at the centre of the Australian Communication Media Authority’s contemporary definition of a documentary program has been interpreted as a sign of the regulatory intention to encourage the broadcast on commercial television of documentaries which demonstrate ‘original thought or expression’. (ABA 2004:4) I would contend that this definition also points to the qualities of the documentary that make it such an exemplary teaching instrument.

Grierson's definition brings together two key elements, 'actuality' and 'creativity', which many students may see as inimical. In teaching, in ways which might well infuriate a philosopher, I pragmatically propose 'actuality' to mean grounded in fact, or real life and usually existing independently of any filming. At the same time, I understand 'creative treatment' to mean that the project demonstrates original thought and aspires to the transcendent status of art and, unlike a newspaper, is likely to have enduring appeal and ongoing relevance. Crucially, documentary making links these two terms through an active process of the filmmaker creatively treating, analysing, dealing with and organising a range of materials (or "documents") which record and represent actuality: the activities, experiences and opinions of real people, places, things and events. Where journalism may report such events, documentary interprets circumstances and goes beyond the 'facts' into an analysis which uses the representation of real people, events, places, ideas, etc to say something about real people, places, ideas and events.

The documentary tradition has been an inclusive one. And as Grierson's contemporary, Alberto Cavalcanti, puts it in his 'Advice to Young Documentary Producers', "Don't depart from the principle which states that three fundamental elements exist: the social, the poetic and the technical" (in Monegal 1955:354). For, as the history of the form confirms, documentarians have not hesitated to draw on montage, surrealism and dramatisation alongside the more familiar triad of narration, interview and observation. In teaching I find myself constantly underscoring the point that documentary storytellers face the issues of character development, psychology, suspense and rhythm as inescapably as those of accuracy, persuasion and advocacy. And together with Michael Rabiger and others, and in humble agreement with Cavalcanti, I find that in the context of a film school curriculum, the process of documentary production links art and life (and form and content) in ways which have benefits for the students and the culture of the institution which extend well beyond the limits or timeframe of any particular project. For, to achieve success in documentary production, the filmmaker must consider and set out to master Cavalcanti's three inter-related spheres: the technical, the poetic, and the social (in Breitrose ed. 2002: 45-55).

The student discovers that, given the often uncontrolled nature of the pro-filmic events which are at the core of so much documentary work, the documentary requires the development of technical competence and facility — it demands a high order of 'familiarity with one's instrument', be it camera, sound or light. In particular, in the edit room it forces the editor and director to truly assess the nature of the footage with which they are presented and to consider the limits and possibilities of the shot, sequence and overall structure. At the same time, since documentary storytelling is an art, it inducts its practitioners into the realm of the poetic where considerations of the rival claims of character, montage, observation, dramatisation, compilation, narration and the surreal are inescapable. And since it is grounded in actuality — in Yeats' "rag and bone shop of the heart" — it forces its makers to recognise the demands of the social sphere: a world of events, participants, audiences, history, ethics, law and commerce (Yeats 1950: 373).

A Parting Comment on the Role of the Documentary in Screen Production Education

In April 2008 the National Film Board, Canada's public film agency, unveiled a new five-year strategic plan designed to support creators of socially engaged projects while embracing the possibilities of the digital age. The plan argues that

In a digital era, {it} is more essential than ever to undertake the kinds of risks that an audiovisual industry in constant state of change and turmoil cannot afford to take... [for] the NFB to step into areas of market failures to create public goods that enrich the country and provide cultural leadership both domestically and internationally... We remain convinced of the powerful, transformative effects of art and imagination for the good... We serve the industry and Canada when we eschew the ordinary, the formulaic and the standard; when we push boundaries; when we reinvent form and experiment with grammars for new technologies; when we search out the stories that aren't being told; when we are doing what cannot be done at all or done readily in the private sector (NFB 2008).

In a similar spirit some fifty years earlier, Cavalcanti concluded his 'Advice to Young Documentary Producers' with the following injunction:

Don't lose the opportunity to experiment; the prestige of the documentary film has been acquired solely by experimentation. Without experimentation, the documentary loses its value; without experimentation, the documentary ceases to exist.

In the end, I believe that it is the documentary which ceaselessly invigorates film language and, whatever the current fashions in aesthetics, technology or culture, it is this protean capacity which gives the documentary an assured and

irresistible role in the fully developed education of screen producers.

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Biography

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