The creative documentary

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“Any creativity which is intended to entertain, provide pleasure, stimulate pleasure, stimulate emotion or provoke thought is art.”

[Owen Kelly, 1996: 10]
CHAPTER 2 THE CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY

Introduction

What is a creative documentary?

This chapter addresses how we can translate notions of 'creativity' to the art of documentary filmmaking.

We have defined creativity in Chapter 1 as 'novelty' in a certain field of cultural production, but we can distinguish between a 'novel' subject and a 'novel' approach in documentary production. The adage of Grierson, founding member of the UK documentary film movement in the 1930s, that documentary is the 'creative treatment of actuality' suggests that creativity has been at the heart of the documentary tradition. The relationship between creativity and actuality has sparked off a century-old debate on how much 'actuality' is left after 'the creative treatment' has taken place and how the 'real' can be presented, if at all.

Early filmmakers, like the Lumière Brothers in 1895, described documentary as 'life on the run'. We would now argue that a concept of documentary as an unbiased observation and recording of the 'real' is naive. Just recording does not really exist: different technologies, like film formats or digitally created images, present very different filmic representations of the 'real'. For instance, a 16 mm picture is distinctly different from a digital image: the grain, the colour, the edges of the objects and the format provide a different representation. Add to this mix the selection of framed shots, the effects of the camera and crew on the profilmic events, and editing, and it becomes clear that recording the real pur sang and presenting it as 'real' because it has happened is an unattainable fantasy. The related aim of documentary to present disembodied knowledge and an objective reality has been challenged by many authors, but not before it essentially damaged the reputation of documentary, causing it to be seen as 'boring' and information-heavy.

However, it raises the question: if you cannot film the 'real', what is the point of documentary? Before we entered the digital era, it was argued that the indexical warrant of the shot was essential. The audience knew that what had been shot had 'really' happened. Digitisation – in particular, special effects – has undermined that notion, not to mention the cases of deliberate manipulation which entered the public domain. The Connection by Marc de Beaufort (UK, 1996), an undercover documentary on drug trafficking between Britain and Columbia, included a claim to have interviewed an important drug trader, which at the end was revealed to be untrue. More recently, the documentary The Queen (UK, 2008) entered the debate about fake and untruthful representation of events. A shot which showed the Queen walking out of a photo shoot was really a shot of the Queen walking to a photo shoot. The creation of a sequence changed the meaning of the shot. It is very easy to manipulate shots or sequences or create computer-generated images. In short, film technologies, the act of filming in a certain situation, and the editing challenge an indexical warrant of a shot, while the editing can undermine the meaning of a shot.

We, as documentary filmmakers, are being left almost empty-handed. Reality does not seem to exist outside the perspective of the filmmaker and images can be manipulated. But what do we tell this hungry child suffering from malaria in the developing world: reality or truth does not exist; you can develop a different perspective on your situation? What if you want to make a documentary about this child?

Of course, this question manipulates you as a reader at this moment, but, with all the debates about relative truths, uncertain knowledges and incomplete knowledges, it is important not to
Catch a falling star

During documentary’s century-long history, many authors have tried to describe the perceived essence of the genre as ‘the representation of the real’.

In the second part of the twentieth century, Bill Nichols, the founding father of documentary theory, suggested that documentaries present ‘an argument about the historical world’. This definition does not seem adequate either, as many documentaries may not analyse the historical world or make an argument at all, even if his focus on the ‘historical world’ is understandable and crucial for the purpose of documentary filmmaking.

You will find that many authors have tried to define ‘documentary’ and struggled. The fragmented nature of reality, and the many forms documentary filmmakers have used and developed, have made it difficult to find a clear-cut definition. Even the term ‘non-fiction’ does not seem to cover our subject; post-modern theorists will argue that a fixed reality outside our own perspective does not exist and that the viewer is part of what is being viewed. You may want to consider this position while thinking about the hungry child with malaria in the developing world.

For the moment, Grierson’s definition might come closest to describing our work as documentary filmmakers. The fragmented nature of reality does not allow it to be represented unmediated. Reality does not present itself in a suitable order or structure ready for the filmmaker to document it. On the contrary we create a narrative to analyse, and represent the realities we encounter and are part of.

Documentary is perhaps best described as a hybrid film genre which attempts to represent the ‘real’ in a creative and critical art form. The history of documentary film illustrates our struggles with the ‘real’ and our attempts to represent it. Implicit in the act of documentary filmmaking is the representation of the ‘real’, and the unavoidable act of creating a narrative produces a tension. As aspiring documentary filmmakers, you need critical awareness and self-reflexivity to explore your practice and engage creatively with the opportunities this tension offers.

A slightly different approach is offered by Ohad Landesman:

The genre cannot reveal an a priori self-evident truth, and should therefore assert a more relative veracity by exercising strategies of fiction and exploiting the grey area between story and fact. Hybrid documentaries seek to achieve a higher, more slippery sense of truth, reaching at, but never quite touching, the longed-for Real.

(Landesman, 2008: 44)

Documentary filmmakers basically try to catch a falling star.
You are encouraged to creatively and critically explore the representational modes of the genre. Theoretical principles are implicit in all our social and creative practices. Historically, new forms of documentary filmmaking have occurred in specific political, social, artistic and technological contexts. You are expected to see a wide range of historical and contemporary films to gain insight into the many forms of representation of the ‘real’ that have been, and are being, used.

Documentary filmmakers have demonstrated a fascination with what happens within our everyday and personal lives: our planet, our history, our obsessions, our relationships, suffering and struggles for food, freedom and resources. Many of these documentaries have provoked debate in the public domain, brought hidden events and lives into the limelight, or changed our perceptions of our world forever. You should never forget that this is the domain in which you are operating.

Serendipity

Documentary filmmaking has a unique feature not found in other forms of filmmaking. Roger Silverstone (1985) describes it as ‘arbitrary’ but it can also be expressed in the word ‘serendipity’. For instance, notwithstanding extensive research, when a documentary filmmaker arrives on location, unexpected events or issues can occur or can be raised. People’s memories are shifting; historic events and experiences are being reframed almost continuously, and perspectives move on. Reality is fluid in people’s experiences and ways of talking about it. Often if you come back to a certain location to talk to people they will comment: ‘After I spoke to you about ... I thought about it and ...’ and then come up with new ideas or perspectives.

Filmmakers can sometimes chance upon a specific approach to their film or their own attitude or relation to it. For example, Nick Broomfield discovered by accident how his presence gave a distinct character to his films. When filming The Leader, His Driver and the Driver’s Wife (UK, 1991), Broomfield was not able to get enough footage of the ‘Leader’ and decided to include those scenes when he was ‘producing’ the film as it revealed a lot about his main character.

Marc Isaacs could be seen as a conceptual filmmaker. Intrigued by the inhabitants of a tower block, he spent months in an elevator making Lift (UK, 2004). The film offers a sensitive and illustrative portrait of the people living in a tower block in East London, but is made very differently from a conventional documentary.

Many documentaries have unearthed issues that were not discussed before in civil society or were not on the political agenda. Films like The Dying Rooms (Channel 4, UK, 1995), The War Tapes (Deborah Scranton, USA, 2006), or Cathy Come Home (Ken Loach, UK, 1966; remastered BFI, 2003) revealed events or human experiences in corners of societies which were hidden from the public eye, whether deliberately or not. Such films provoke debate in society or lead to the foundation of charities, questions being asked in Parliament or the formation of action groups.

These so-called ‘social issues’ documentaries play an important role in the discourse of many documentary filmmakers.

Andy Glynne, documentary filmmaker and founder of the Documentary Filmmakers Group: As a clinical psychologist, I think the reason that I felt frustrated doing my clinical work was that it wasn’t really making as much of a difference as I wished it would. So I started thinking about making films. And I got obsessed with idea that documentaries can change the world. There are docs out there that have been making a difference ... I think documentary filmmakers on the whole tend to be slightly left-wing and slightly more caring about the world and social issues.

[Interview with Andy Glynne, 2008]
Wanting to change the world, to make a difference is, of course, a laudable aim and a dominant discourse in the documentary filmmaking tradition, but it can also have a paralysing effect on the process. Filmmakers are part of contemporary cultures and the aim of representing reality can also result in ‘reinforcing existing stereotypes’. Recently, I saw a documentary about homeless people, which aimed to illustrate the thin line between homelessness and having a home: how people could become homeless because they lost their jobs, got divorced or were simply thrown out of the house by their parents. It was just a shame that all the people featured in the film were men. Don’t women become homeless? A critical analysis and reflection on what you are filming and how you are editing your film and showing it to an audience are necessary to be sure that the film conveys what you want it to do.

We all know films in which the subjects are portrayed as victims. These so-called victim films have been very popular since the 1980s (Winston, 1995; Chanan, 2007; Basu, 2008), notwithstanding a discourse of ‘empowering people or ‘giving people a voice’. Filmmakers can’t ‘give people a voice’. Documentary filmmaking is not the art of passing on people’s experiences or ideas. The filmmaker selects and creates a narrative which may or may not undermine ‘the people’s voice’. Although these aspects can be shown in all films, films about the developing world are notable for it:

Despite the fact that a lot of these filmmakers were very educated people who I still admire, I think traditionally indigenous societies have been characterised either as the exotic other . . . the natives are savage, leading an idealised jungle life, or, at the other end of the spectrum, the passive victims of progress, sitting with arms folded, waiting to cast off clothes of western society, waiting for bulldozers to consign them to oblivion. And I thought, there is another way of telling this, the voice that I heard, that I knew. Indigenous people as protagonists, as humans leading interesting, difficult, complex lives. Trying to make the best. Adapting from our society those things that suited them, that ensured their survival. Making mistakes in that process but also trying to hold on to what it was that they value.

Issues of the representation of people are fundamental to documentary filmmaking and filmmakers should be aware of how they represent their subjects. Filming tribes while they are doing their habitual dancing may be entertaining, but might confirm the stereotype of the ‘wild savage’, despite the intention of giving them a voice. You may ask yourself as well how defining the dancing is and how defining it is in English culture to wear paper hats during the annual Christmas dinner.

For instance, Sisters in Law (Kim Longinotto, UK, 2005) or Divorce Iranian Style (Kim Longinotto, UK, 1999) are remarkable because the audience is on a journey to experience parts of lives which are unfamiliar to western audiences. The style might be described as ‘observational’ but it is very different from the observational style of Frederick Wiseman or the Maysles brothers, the prolific founders of the observational film from the 1960s. The film is very directly shot, close to the skin, but it shares with conventional observational documentaries the lack of context. Some will consider this a strength, as it provides an audience with an active role in
interpretation of the events. Conversely, it can be argued that the lack of context might confirm stereotypical interpretation of events as no new narrative is being presented and audiences have to rely on their existing knowledge.

The documentary filmmaker Daisy Asquith works with small cameras to get very close to her subjects; she films almost under the skin of her subjects and interacts with them. Often you have the feeling you are part of a personal conversation – or is it eavesdropping? Clearly, this method of working has been made possible by small digital cameras which make it easier for her to work on her own and create a very intimate relation to subjects. This sense of closeness to her main characters gives audiences insight into their daily lives and the choices they make.

Inspired by the possibilities or impossibilities of technology, circumstances or just an idea, a novel approach can be found. Taking risks, daring to experiment, are important features of making 'creative' documentaries.

Information

Documentary is considered to be a genre that conveys information, perhaps even one that should convey information. Many documentaries can and do do this, but quite a few documentaries collapse as an artistic product as the film becomes too information-heavy or the structuring devices used do not offer enough emotional engagement. You might be passionate about a subject, but somehow that passion needs to be translated into a film. Documentaries are not filmed books, nor are they simply a series of visually attractive shots, edited in quick pace and supported by a musical score. A documentary takes an audience to an existing or past reality and is so compelling that they can empathise with mind, emotions and imagination. In that sense, documentary is an ambitious creative and critical enterprise.

How to make a creative documentary

There is no map with clear directions available for making a creative documentary, but we can describe some of the fruitful conditions that underpin this ambition.

• You need knowledge and awareness of different traditions in the history of documentary filmmaking. Creative cultural products generally modify, challenge or are inspired by what has been produced before.
• You need to develop an ability to locate and understand different approaches to the subject, and play with different ideas.
• Creative work tends to borrow and mix technologies or forms from different or related genres or art forms but also from different cultural fields. This process is often described as hybridisation.
• In order to be a creative filmmaker it helps to be an avid consumer (of film/media/multimedia). (See ways of watching documentaries, page 27.)
• Take time to digest; down time is essential in creative production. (See section on Creative practices.)
• Try to collaborate with other disciplines; different skills can contribute to the creative process.
• Be a member of a professional community. Creative communities provide ideas, contacts, venues and access to broadcasters, funders and festivals. (See the website of the Documentary Filmmakers Group or the European Documentary Network.)
• Understand the purpose of the film, for whom is it made and why.
Take ideas further, find new angles and don’t copy others: push yourself.
Above all, give up the idea that you can create a masterpiece on your own in splendid isolation.

Documentary is in a period of enormous change in the way it can tell stories, so experiment and dare to make mistakes or spend hours in editing rooms to make the film work.

Contemporary creative practices

After looking at the meaning of creativity, the creative process and creative documentary, we look at contemporary creative practices. Documentary filmmaking is increasingly merging with other creative practices. For instance, documentary filmmakers are expected to produce an authored DVD of their film, an internet site, or an interactive documentary for the web or a gallery or museum. Many authors describe the effects of rapid technological changes, the commercialisation of our culture and global media industries on contemporary creative practices. The context for the creative practices of documentary filmmakers is very different from 10 years ago. In the next chapter we will consider the creative industries in more depth, but here we will analyse the practices themselves.

Brad Haseman (in Hartley, 2005: 167) distinguishes five different characteristics of creative practices in the contemporary creative industries.

1. Creative practices involve interactivity

YouTube, 4Docs, MySpace are typical examples where audiences can interact with media content. As a consequence, the relationship between author/filmmaker and audience changes and a power shift takes place. It is hard to imagine making a documentary without having a website where one can see the whole or selected sequences of the film, or a DVD which shows interviews with the makers and scenes not used in the final edit. Creating a website during the production process, where interested people can follow the ‘making of’, or after the film is finished, where audiences can find background information on the film, has become a common practice to engage potential audiences and is a de facto part of a marketing strategy.

It has been argued that the arrival of the cinema and television in the twentieth century denied audiences an opportunity to interact with their media. For centuries, the theatre was a place where artists could express their ideas in the form of theatrical productions and audiences had the possibility to cheer, to boo or to shout ‘Encore’. However, it has been one of the characteristics of new digital technologies that the audience, as a group or individually, has become more influential. Some documentary filmmakers like to show their films in different locations in order to obtain feedback. Writers discuss their work in literary festivals or reading events. As already described, artists learn about their work through reaction from their audiences and their peers. Audience reactions can sometimes be very surprising and unexpected.

But the focus on the interactivity of contemporary media production drives the creation and integration of content across different platforms.

2. Creative practices are intrinsically hybrid

The history of documentary filmmaking shows an increased usage of elements traditionally belonging to other forms of media or cultural production: for example, fiction, literary tradition, news or other technologies. Technically, the form has evolved by incorporating other
technologies, such as photography, animation, and graphic design. Blurring the boundaries between genres has always been a characteristic of documentary production. Early documentaries used re-enactment (Nanook of the North, Robert Flaherty, USA, 1922) and dramatisation to depict a wide range of realities. In fact, the documentary filmmaker’s toolbox, which allowed audiences to experience other people’s lives, social situations, cultures and introduced them to unfamiliar topics, has always used ‘tools’ from other genres or technologies. Documentary history can be described as a ‘melting pot’ of a wide range of storytelling devices and a variety of technological tools.

Hybridisation implies that it is not only the product that is a hybrid but that the production process is hybridised as well. (See Chapter 14.)

3. Creative practices embrace new sites and forms of cultural production

The unique capacity of digital media focuses on its ability to receive and transmit content. The computer screen is seen as the third screen, after the cinema and television, which are used to distribute media content to large audiences, while the computer screen distributes content to the individual or the few. Multi-media, which blurs the boundaries between genres, performance pieces that use video projection, documentaries that enter a museum or a gallery environment, that use websites or DVDs, all mean that the formats of contemporary documentaries and their distribution are undergoing a rapid change. New forms and formats of documentary production challenge the old idea of the ‘documentary’ as just a film. Thinking across different media platforms and considering how these platforms influence both the content and form of documentary projects seems to be one of our contemporary challenges.

Examples of documentaries across different platforms are Against The Tide (ATT.org.uk), From Zero by Stefano Strocchi and Out my Window by Catherine Sicek, which is one of the world’s first interactive 360° documentaries. It’s a journey round urban areas throughout the world, recounted by people who look out of windows in high-rise towers.

4. Creative practices are oriented towards multiplatform, cross-promotional means of distribution

In the contemporary climate, emerging filmmakers need to take into account complex and innovative distribution systems which may influence the production of the work. Making a documentary for the cinema is different from making a documentary for television, as distribution and its consequences are already being considered in the conception stage.

Interactive documentary projects and non-linear documentaries use different scripting techniques and require different ways of approaching one’s subject. (See Chapter 13.)

5. Creative practices are not approached as if they are commercially irrelevant

Haseman argues that the production of cultural artefacts will not operate separate from but within commercial environments and realities. In his view, it’s no longer helpful to distinguish between films funded by state agencies and arts organisations and those cultural products produced and distributed by private enterprise. This argument challenges a long-standing division between ‘commercial’ and ‘artistic’ work. It does not imply that commercial work is not creative
but approaches it as popular cultural product and, therefore, attracting bigger audiences, while 'high' art is appreciated by relatively small audiences. Documentary traditionally could be situated on the fringe of popular culture. Both content and format demanded very different media literacy from its audiences. Contemporary documentaries have become more popular, as filmmakers have developed different and more accessible formats to tell their stories. However, it is not very likely that a documentary on, for instance, child soldiers will ever get the same audiences as *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, UK, 2003) or *Supersize Me* (Morgan Spurlock, USA, 2004) did. At present, broadcasters and national funders use far more commercial criteria and popular cultural values to judge film proposals. It might be argued that 'high' art is more marginalised in the contemporary funding and distribution climate.

In conclusion, what is considered 'novel' in a certain field of cultural production is time-bound, culturally specific and related to the experiences and social position of the filmmaker. The term 'situated knowledge' may help you appreciate that you know, feel, react as a person in a specific position in society. Historically, documentary filmmaking has been socially one-dimensional; most documentary filmmakers have been male, white, and middle class as these were the people with access to the technologies and the field of production. There have been a limited number of female filmmakers, especially documentary editors, but they have been hidden from history (see Chapter 20). It illustrates the fact that the aim of representing the real has been tainted by fundamental ideological positions of that period in history and those documentary filmmakers' preoccupations and ambitions. Notwithstanding their aim of 'representing the real', they were not free of these ideological notions. It meant that what was represented in the documentary tradition was also the concerns most relevant to men. However, more women and filmmakers from different ethnic backgrounds have started to enter the field of documentary film production.

It is important to reflect on your social position and be aware of your interpretation of certain realities, rather than presenting your ideas as the one and only truth. This might actually help to make films that make a difference – or change the world, if you so wish.

**Ways of Watching Documentaries**

The following formal criteria for the analysis of a documentary might help you to form your ideas and find a way of watching films in a professional way. You are not just an audience. As a documentary filmmaker, you have a dual position and multiple gazes: you want to be engaged by the film but, at the same time, you look at how the story is being told, the formal structure of the film, how the film is technically created and, above all, at what is new, creative or original in subject and form.

Please try to apply the following criteria to the documentaries you are watching:

- Mode of address: how the audience is being addressed by the film
- Camera style/shot sequences
- Choice and treatment of subject matter
- Narration/voice-over
- Use of sound, special effects and music

In addition, it might be useful to ask the following questions.

- Which interests have been served?
- Which specific voices have been heard?
- Which are being silenced?
Key points

- Narrative shapes the ‘realities’ you are filming.
- Representation is always mediated.
- Awareness of the potential bias of one’s own social position is essential.
- Working, thinking and imagining in an interdisciplinary context and across media platforms feeds the contemporary climate on documentary filmmaking.
- Being creative and critical go hand in hand in a documentary context.

Exercises

Exercise 1

Look at the following documentaries:

- Heavy Load (Jerry Rothwell, UK, 2007) How far does this film undermine or confirm existing ideas about people with learning disabilities?
- Lift (Marc Isaacs, UK, 2001) How would you describe the narrative form of this film and how has this influenced the representation of the inhabitants of the tower block?
- Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go (Kim Longinotto, UK, 2007) How would you describe the representation of the young people in this film?
- The Lie of the Land (Molly Dineen, UK, 2007) How would you describe the role of the filmmaker and her impact on the interviewees in this film?

Exercise 2

Dream about the film you would like to make. Picture yourself with an audience and imagine what you would tell them about the film. After this guided fantasy, write down who your audience was and why you wanted to tell them that story.

Exercise 3

Association – what are the issues you are interested in?

Draw a circle and write in it the things that interest you. For each word that comes up, write down another that is connected. Circle it. See if you can create clusters of interests or affiliations and passions.
Dogma 2001: Kill the Documentary As We Know It

Jill Godmilow

Jill Godmilow is an American director-producer who continually pushes the boundaries of both realist and fictional filmmaking. A well-known film is *Far from Poland* (USA, 1984) about the role of the Polish Solidarity movement and its role in the fall of communism. She was denied visas for herself and her crew to shoot in Poland so she created a form which did not require access to Poland. At the centre of the film are three re-enactments of key texts, three imaginary conversations with Fidel Castro, a letter to a hungry Polish friend, a fantasy tale about the end of the Polish struggle and her own considerations and deliberations about both Solidarity and documentary as a realist film text.

The following is a shortened version of her ‘dogma’ about documentary filmmaking, from an article she wrote called *Kill the Documentary As We Know It*:

1. Don’t produce the surface of things: have a real subject and real analysis, or at least an intelligent proposition that is larger than the subject of your film.
2. Don’t produce freak shows of the oppressed, the different, the primitive, and the criminal. Please don’t use your compassion as an excuse for social ‘pornography’.
3. Don’t make films that celebrate ‘the old ways’ and mourn loss.
4. Don’t produce awe for the rich, the famous, the powerful, the talented, the highly successful.
5. Keep an eye on your own middle-class bias and your audience’s. Don’t make films that feed it.
6. Find a way to acknowledge your authorship.
7. Leave your parents out of this.


**Question**

Godmilow’s ‘dogmas’ challenge conventional realist documentary filmmaking. What do you think she means by social ‘pornography’?