

**Talk given to the Independent Scholars Association of Australia, as part of a series of "Conversations with Cultural Pacemakers" NSW Chapter. State Library of NSW 2003**

Documentaries are the moral conscience of the nation. I'd like to argue that in this time of fast news and info-tainment there is a greater need for documentaries than ever before to offer us sharp insights into who we are as Australians.

Around the world there has been a documentary renaissance.. Michael Moore's film grossed more on the first weekend in America than Spielberg's Return Of the Jedi. Its now the highest grossing documentary on record. Not all documentaries have performed as well as that but there has been a growing audience fascination with non-fiction film, and for someone like me who's been making these films all his life this is extremely gratifying.

As a documentary filmmaker I'm concerned with issues, but I see myself, first and foremost as a storyteller. I believe this is the best way to move and affect an audience. I tend to pick stories that have some resonance in the lives of a general audience - it's through people identifying with a situation that they can gain insight into the these bigger issues.

In my films I've covered subjects as various as industrial confrontation (*Kemira - Diary of a Strike, Friends & Enemies*), the creation of East Timor's independence (*The Diplomat*), over-development in a fragile community (*Lord of the Bush*), how physical displacement affects a marriage (*Homelands*), the vilification of Australian Lebanese (*Billal*), and issues facing refugees on Temporary Protection Visas (*Molly & Mobarak*).

For every film I initiate the method is the same. I start with an idea based on an issue I feel strongly about. I do background research. I talk to people. I decide on a location. A period of exploration then begins. I seek out my subjects - people whose lives I want to follow because they serve to express these ideas, or dramatise the issues.

I introduce the camera at an early stage to make people used to the process. At one level this is all about seduction and manipulation because being the filmmaker *you* have all the power. For me, however, this is an untenable ethical position unless you start giving away some of that power to the subject. It therefore becomes a subtle transaction. People make themselves vulnerable to you and you vulnerable to them, and at the end you must give them the right to veto the film. Its not surprising that each film is always fraught with ethical issues – no documentary can escape them.

I call my documentaries ‘ve’rite narratives’ after the term coined by French documentary pioneer Jean Rouch. Rouch defined ‘cinema ve’rite’ as referring to a combination of handheld camera, interaction and subject participation. He also talked about the camera as ‘a kind of psychological stimulant’ making people reveal facets of themselves that might otherwise be hidden.

The very core of the ve’rite film is the encounter before the camera, the moment when the filmmaking process disrupts and intrudes upon the reality of the world it is documenting. For ve’rite to succeed there has to be a strong level of trust between a person shooting and the person being filmed. If things go right then its possible to ‘capture’ moments on camera that are unpremeditated, and surprisingly intimate. For some people, having a camera around is like being given permission to reveal one’s most intimate secrets.

When I start the shooting I have no idea what the final film will be like at the end. I don’t make a film from a script. Instead, day by day I re-invent it. It’s a process that goes on for at least 8 months. Half-way through shooting the actual editing begins. This is a vital creative collaboration with my editor Ray Thomas. (We’ve been working together for the past 15 years and on 11 films) and one which usually lasts up to 20 weeks.

With the film finished the screening process begins – usually with a launch at a film festival. Soon the film starts to have a life of its own

- independent of yourself the maker. My most recent film *Molly & Mobarak* has reached audiences in cinemas, festivals, libraries, council halls, classrooms, and on television. I would like to think the film has kept issues around refugees discarded by the mass media circulating in the public sphere. However till last November I never thought of this documentary as being subversive simply because it humanised an issue of public importance.

All we did was simply to apply to hold a screening at Federal Parliament. There's always been a tradition of new documentaries being screened to MP's and staffers. So it came as a surprise that Joint House leader Mr Wedgwood acting on the advice of the Speaker Neil Andrew rejected **Molly & Mobarak**. Wedgwood's letter (leaked to the Canberra Times) stated several reasons, including that "this film promotes the theme of widespread opposition to government policy and might cause offence to a significant part of the Australian community."

The ban was outrageous and it was subsequently overturned in 48 hours after pressure from my local Labor member Tanya Plibersek. Because of all the publicity Canberrans of course responded and we had a full cinema.

I've been trying to ask myself what significance to read into this petty attempt at censorship? Maybe one reason is bound up with the difference between documentary and current affairs. Current affairs is essentially an investigation driven by a reporter while documentary is more an exploration of the contemporary/historical through the personal. Perhaps the film struck a raw nerve because it actually humanised refugees.

Ironically just last week Senator Vanstone announced that all Afghans on temporary visas will have them converted to Permanent ones. They will become citizens of this country with full rights - and Mobarak is one of them. I'd like to think my film might have played some small part in making this happen.

So why is documentary making such a come back - because people I believe are sick of the dumbing down of television. They want more intellectual stimulation - they want to be entertained, but also challenged at the same

time. Another reason, I believe, is because there's a real hunger to find meaning in the post Sept 11 world. There is a public craving for authenticity.

The resurgence of documentary is a phenomenon few could have predicted given its steady marginalisation on television. Since the mid 90's documentary has been separating in two totally different directions: reality-based series and factual info-tainment, versus the traditional longer form social documentary which has been pushed back to ever later time-slots. This has been a world-wide trend.

Traditionally there's always been an uneasy relationship between television and documentary. Television, by its very nature, constructs audiences as consumers. It tends to be prescriptive and concerned with ratings and the focus is on diversion and entertainment. Meanwhile documentary forces you to engage with the content - to think for yourself so that your imagination fills the gaps. It's got a strong and personal point of view and it's got complexity and depth. However, I'm optimistic that the interest in theatrical documentary will now begin to translate to television scheduling and programming as well.. SBS this year started a new documentary strand "Storyline Australia" dedicated entirely to local product and so far it is performing very well.

Where do the funds to make documentaries come from? They can only come from the public sector. They are a heavily publicly subsidised endeavour. So it would be no surprise to you if I say that documentaries, like the arts sector more generally in Australia, are suffering under a Liberal government. Indeed, I fear that we might be losing the *art* of documentary? Where is the Australian equivalent of Fahrenheit 9/11? Why have the vast majority of documentaries that have been released in cinemas around the country this year all been American and European?

It is timely and important to remind ourselves just how important documentaries are in maintaining a healthy democracy. If we don't tell our own stories to ourselves - who else will?

“The struggle of men against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”. Milan Kundera

Tom Zubrycki

### **Biography**

Tom Zubrycki is one of Australia's leading documentary filmmakers with a substantial and widely-respected body of work. **Molly & Mobarak**, his latest film, takes up the themes of displacement and the search for home – ideas that he has been exploring filmically since the 90's. **Molly & Mobarak**, shown recently on SBS television, is an unfolding love story between Mobarak, a young Afghani refugee, and Molly, a school teacher in a country town. Tom's recent filmography includes **Homelands** (1993), **Billal** (1996) and **The Diplomat** (2000) – the prize-winning documentary about the East Timorese Nobel Peace Laureate Jose Ramos-Horta.