

“From video to film and back again” by Tom Zubrycki

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in 1995 I thought I was one of the few people in Australia left working in this observationally-driven style, but then suddenly a year later the DV camcorder revolution arrived. For the first time images generated by this low-format technology were deemed acceptable by broadcasters. Verite and personal essay styles were being seriously discussed again, and the AFC acknowledged these new technological innovations initiating its Ultra-Low Budget (aka Guerilla Doc) fund.

The problem is that the video portapak and the camcorder are 20 years apart. Times have changed. The social context has changed. The value system that's now prevalent in this post-modernist period puts the emphasis on the individual rather than on community. So its not surprising that video, rather than facilitating social interaction, is facilitating psycho-drama. I'm referring to camcorder-driven *'reality television'*.

Its broadcasters that have been the first ones to exploit these new developments and SBS's *"First Person"* has been the first cab off the rank. From one hundred volunteers six people were selected to record their own lives during a 6 month period. All the diarists faced some sort of personal crisis: An ex-prisoner trying to come to terms with life 'on the outside'; Bernice, formerly Bernard, in a small country town in Victoria facing her decision to become a woman; a taxi-driver trying to change her life and an unemployed man fights his gambling addiction. All diarists kept in regular touch with an SBS series producer who guided them from what I understand in a semi-directorial fashion. According to the producer it took the diarists a month to get used to having a camera around, but once they did, scenes of extraordinary self-revelation followed - brawls, tears, violence, secrets. "Once they got confident about it, they used it as a therapy tool", he said. This might have been empowering for some - like the story shot by a woman in the dying town of Wittenoon uprooting herself to a new home and lifestyle. But for others it had totally the reverse effect.

Barrie, the compulsive gambler, has a girl-friend Maureen and a young child. The couple argue a lot - over money. As the film unfolds, the camera becomes a powerful weapon that each person uses against the other. Occasionally each both people individually address the camera as they would a counsellor sitting next to them. In one scene an almighty blue happens. Furniture is upturned, a lamp is smashed. There are tears, screams and 4-letter words.

The producer undertook to give the participants total veto rights - if they didn't like something, they could change it. This was quite unprecedented in a television series. But when it came to the crunch to involve Barrie and Maureen in the editing this didn't happen. Barrie claimed an article in "The Australian" (20/5/96) that he "wasn't given the chance. The conditions were all made by them (SBS)." The film, he says, portrays him as a "single-dimensional gambling nut case, and ignores the

family's good times. It's a myopic view..." . I learnt later that this program and others in the series returned SBS very respectable ratings.

A certain degree of voyeurism may indeed be intrinsic to good documentary, but in "FIRST PERSON" I've seen aspects of voyeurism taken to their worst extreme. Some of the programs have a 'freak show' quality about them, as if the editors/producer of the series are pushing aspects of the diarist's personality which are difficult or confronting.

In a similar vein a recent British "documentary" series is a damning indictment of what happens when directorial decisions fall into the hands of broadcasters. In the series called *Russian Wonderland*, made by the BBC, a number of Russian filmmakers were asked to collect a mass of material on contemporary aspects of Russian life. They did their job, but afterwards had no control over the material. This footage was reduced to 13 episodes, each 15 minutes long. The director of the series sat in his London base. He talked to the filmmakers, he instructed them, but never once appeared on location. Finally the Russians material was cut together according to the viewing habits of another culture. Is this, or is not this an example of a colonial filmmaking at its worst?

As a documentary filmmaker, I have ambivalent feelings about Reality Television not only because its a very cheap way of making quasi-docs, but that it will drag down the reputation and integrity of the form. Rather than 'empowering' the subjects, these programmes (I hesitate to call them 'films') have, I suggest, had the reverse effect. The subjects sense of powerlessness has been heightened. It seems from the community-driven portapak work to the 'reality TV's' camcorder we've come a full circle.

I actually believe that most people in the documentary industry treat the relationship with the subject with far greater sensitivity. A set of ethical standards has evolved over the years based on a strongly collaborative model and a notion of informed consent. Many of us involve our subjects in the editing of our films and sometimes even give them the right of final veto. I've just finished a film where exactly this happened.

"Billal" follows the aftermath of an incident that occurred in a little suburban street in the suburb of Macquarie Fields. One evening a feud starts between 2 neighbours - windows are broken, rocks thrown, a few black eyes and people arrested. The next day it turns nasty. A 16 year-old Lebanese boy - Billal is run-over. Its a crime with underlying racist elements. The film starts with Billal in a coma in hospital and follows him and his family as they sort out their shattered lives over for the ensuing 15 months.

Naturally my film is a subjective interpretation of what happened - its a recording of key events that took place, but filtered through my experience of the situation and the degree of access I was able to get. The film contained some highly sensitive material and I considered it paramount to show the film at fine-cut to the main participant to ensure that their view was consistent with the way I myself had

experienced the events - not the same necessarily - but consistent. The issue was that I was not misrepresenting them or misquoting them or putting scenes out of context. For example there is a scene in the film where an operation goes wrong and causes startling changes in Billal's behaviour. We captured revealing material and I wanted to make sure that presenting it in the film was not going to have any long term negative repercussions.

What I'm basically saying is that in films of this nature, and this goes for all documentary in the late 20th century the relationship between the filmmaker and the participants will be ever more crucial, and this is increasingly going to be the case given the digital camcorder revolution where new levels of intimacy will be achieved. The old codes and conventions implying passivity on behalf of the subject are all changing. putting into question the all-powerful position of filmmaker as artist. The democratisation that digital vision has introduced means documentary filmmaking has to be viewed differently. The filmmaker continues to have ultimate power, but he/she must use it responsibly. I believe that's the key question of the late 20th century not only in documentary, but in the media generally. It makes the epistemological discussion about truth and objectivity into a side-show

In conclusion I believe that digital camcorders may well cause a popular resurgence of documentary. Greater access to sophisticated recording technology at a low price must lead to more experimentation with the form. Observational styles will come back in a big way, and so will the ability to make very individual statements - digitally manipulating recorded footage for a very subjective effect. It will be possible to document a political action over time, or record social interaction at a very personal level with informed consent from the participants. Meanwhile, Reality Television, hopefully will die a quick death.