

The 2000 NSW Premier's History Awards Address

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Ahead of history' - the documentary filmmaker in the age of extremes by Tom Zubrycki

In his book *Age of Extremes* Eric Hobsbawm refers to the difficulty of writing history on the twentieth century because it is not 'a period known only from outside'. 'If the historian can make sense of this century', he says, 'it is in large part because of watching and listening.'

Reading Hobsbawm's words made me think that the work of a documentary filmmaker and that of a contemporary historian are related in important ways. 'Watching and listening' is at the very heart of documentary filmmaking, but so is the process of discovery, of finding drama in everyday life and then telling a story with a point of view.

Wollongong brings back many memories for me. It was here back in the mid 1970's that I worked as a tutor in the Sociology Dept of the University - and it was here that I made a film - my second film - which really launched me into a career of filmmaking.. You may recall that, back in 1982, 31 miners staged a sit-in strike over sixteen days in the Kemira colliery - in protest against being given retrenchment notices by BHP. It was an event that seemed to galvanise the whole community here in Wollongong - to the extent that a train-load of miners and steel-workers set off one day to Canberra to seek an audience with the then prime minister Malcolm Fraser. We were there with them.- myself and a crew working on deferred wages.

I remember it being a warm Canberra October day. People got off the train and walked in peaceful procession from the station to old Parliament House. Everyone was in high spirits - in fact entire families had made the trip, the children having taken the day off school. The police had set up a flimsy barrier just in front of Parliament. Suddenly high spirits turned to anger and a large group broke the barrier and run towards the building. A few moments later they were inside and the front plate glass doors were smashed.

Sensing I was recording history in the making, I continued filming, gambling that I would raise the money later to complete the film. Credit card filming, by the way, is as common now as it was then, because history doesn't wait and a dramatic re-construction is not the same as the real thing. We returned to the pit-top again and again, documenting the strike and its long term effects on one particular family. Eventually we secured our funding and completed the film which seemed to capture the spirit of an era. It went on to

be critically applauded and won several awards. It was even sold to the ABC - rare in those days for an independently-produced documentary.

Kemira gave me professional credibility and access to places and people that otherwise would have been difficult. My instinct was to exploit that access - so I went to Queensland! Something big was brewing: Queensland unions had thrown down the gauntlet to the Bjelke-Petersen dictatorship.

It was February 1985. Over one thousand electrical linesmen employed by the South East Queensland Electricity Board went on strike in protest at the state government's intention to put its whole workforce on contract. Queensland was in chaos with electricity blackouts every other night.

It is rare in such a polarised dispute to get access to both sides, but I somehow managed it. My key character on the government side was Vince Lester, an eccentric National Party farmer from Central Queensland who delighted in walking backwards for charity. Vince was in charge of the dispute. Then there was Bernie Neville who organised the pickets and ran the strike committee. As the weeks went by the pickets ran out of steam and Bernie ran out of ideas. He became an angry, bitter man, turning his aggression against the union officials and accusing them of mishandling the strike. By the eighth month of the dispute Bernie's anger began even to alienate those around him. To top it off, the ACTU got involved and came up with a deal to save only a bare fraction of the jobs. Not surprisingly it was rejected by the striking linesmen.

I knew *Friends & Enemies* was a controversial film. There were no heroes: not the local Trades and Labor Council, not the ACTU, nor the Queensland government - not even the strike committee.

Two years after the dispute began and six months after the filming finished, the film was premiered. I suppose I should have anticipated what happened next.

Imagine the scene: a packed audience in a Brisbane cinema. The credits roll, the applause follows. Suddenly, Bernie leaps to the stage. He grabs the microphone and denounces me for misrepresenting him and allegedly leaving out crucial parts of the story. The audience erupts. For the next two hours the film is debated and argued by the protagonists on both sides. I start questioning myself. I 're-wind' the last six months of editing. Have I done a disservice by not presenting Bernie in a positive light? But is it not more important to have an honest portrayal? 12 months after the strike had collapsed it had already passed into history, but there was certainly no consensus about how that history was to be read and understood - just wildly opposing interpretations.

In retrospect, given what had happened, it was a complete folly to do what I did next: take on a film about the history of the trade union movement. It was 1988. Money was available through the Bicentennial Authority for major 'once in a lifetime' projects and I convinced the ACTU to support the idea.

I took on the task, consulting with historians, and writing draft scripts which the sponsor - the ACTU - finally approved. The film titled *Amongst Equals* was shot and edited. But that was when the trouble started. The ACTU obfuscated and delayed giving the final approval. Eventually it became clear that they were intentionally preventing the film from being released.

It emerged through discussions that what they really wanted was a hagiography which downplayed the history of industrial struggle and highlighted the government-union accord and the arbitration system. I strongly objected on the grounds of censorship and the abuse of intellectual property. I had no intention of making a piece of propaganda to suit the ACTU's political agenda at the time.

After an aborted attempt at mediation I decided to risk a possible injunction and release the film illegally. Long queues formed at the Chauvel Cinema for the one-off screening. There were articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, letters to the editor, public forums. Phillip Adams even tried to resolve the dispute live on national radio - to no avail. In retrospect I was naive to think that a film made for a sponsor such as the ACTU could ever be historically accurate. What was 'history' here but a commodity to be manipulated by sectional interests? Historian Stuart Macintyre argues that 'history is inherently provisional, open to discovery and contestation, a constant process of dialogue'. Never a truer word said.

When the 90's began I decided to give unions a rest for a while and to concentrate on themes that were closer to my own migrant past. I made two very closely observed studies of migrant families. The first film *HOMELANDS* was about a refugee family, newly arrived from El Salvador, and the second *BILLAL* was about a Lebanese family living in Sydney's western suburbs. Both were personal studies about families responding to a crisis which engulfed their lives.

Billal happened more by chance than design. I'd done a lot of research in Sydney's outer-western suburbs and wanted to make a film about a group of teenagers who were about to leave high school. I planned to follow their lives over the ensuing twelve months, but then a dramatic U-turn occurred. I received a phonecall from the father of a sixteen year old Lebanese boy. He told me that his son Billal had been run over by a car driven by an Anglo-Australian teenager after a gang fight and that he had sustained severe brain injuries. Billal was in hospital fighting for his life. I dropped my scenario for the original film to follow the new story - the aftermath of this tragedy.

The family needed us as much as we needed them. They felt isolated. They felt they could not trust anyone – not even social workers from their own community. We were the closest at hand. As you can imagine, our roles as filmmakers quickly became complicated as we became their counsellors and advocates. Our interpreter Alissar ended up as intermediary between the family and the outside bureaucratic world. Looking back I believe that by combining the roles of filmmaker and advocate we overcame the ethical dilemma that presents itself when somebody else's trauma becomes the subject of your film.

After making *Billal* I did a lot of soul-searching about what to do next. I decided to produce as well as direct - largely to make ends meet. I thought producing would be less taxing than directing! How wrong I was. A project was brought to me in 1995 by a man who'd never made a film before, but the concept was a strong one. His name was Tahir Cambis. Tahir wanted to spend four months in Sarajevo making a film about the siege of the city his mother was born in, but which he'd never been to. I knew this wasn't going to be an easy project.

The crew left Australia with ruck sacks, flak jackets, camping stoves, freeze dried food – all prepared to camp in a partly damaged house with no electricity. I had little contact with them. Three months in Sarajevo turned into four. I eventually ran out of money to pay the cinematographer so the director himself had to take over the filming. He'd never used a camera before. Six months turned into eight. I didn't know if he was still alive. Then one day he rang from the airport - he'd arrived with a new girlfriend but minus his flak jacket which he had traded for food and rent.

Tahir had a strong vision and I supplied him with a very experienced editor. The film, which became known as *Exile In Sarajevo*, is a very personal and poetic homage to the city, as well as a bitter attack on those who were responsible for its destruction. It ended-up winning an international Emmy - not bad for a film that at one stage looked like finishing in a heap on the floor.

After two more projects as producer I yearned to direct again. I was extremely lucky. One day I was contacted by a colleague. Did I want to direct a film about East Timorese leader José Ramos-Horta? Yes. I leapt at the chance.

Exiled from his homeland, José lived out of a suitcase. His life had been an endless series of taxis, airports and hotel rooms. I found José an enigmatic character having both a charming and a dark side, relentlessly ego-driven in the pursuit of his goals. We started filming in April 1998. Two months later Suharto resigned, Indonesia was in turmoil and we were on a roller-coaster

ride. Suddenly we were not only telling José's story but we were telling the story of the birth of a new nation.

Filming with José was not easy. It was like looking for cracks between the private and the public. He said what he wanted to say and what he felt was politically appropriate at that moment, but persistence paid off, and after two years we had amassed 140 hours of material. You can imagine what a challenge it was to compress a complex set of historical events into 81 minutes. In fact it took us more than twenty weeks of editing. Throughout that time I felt a very grave responsibility to accurately reflect the facts. But how could anyone not be affected by the images of fear on the faces of innocent people when confronted by the military-backed militia? How could anyone possibly condone the terror that the Indonesian generals had set in train?

Stuart Macintyre puts it in a nutshell when he describes the historian as not a simple observer of events, but as someone 'inside the history, inextricably caught up in a continuous making and remaking of the past'. It's the same for the documentary filmmaker. One's personal experience of any event shapes the way one sees it, edits it, narrates it. What one produces cannot be devoid of subjectivity. We live in a multicultural, global world in which there is no last voice, there is no final point of view, there are simply just a series of emerging and complex voices. Documentary filmmakers, I believe, have the duty of giving a vehicle to these voices and adding their own to it. To the extent that this will continue to happen, documentary will remain a permanent feature of our cultural landscape and will continue to provide crucial insights into who we are as Australians.

However I cannot end this presentation without a word of caution. Hobsbawm uses a phrase 'Age of Extremes' to describe the twentieth century. I believe it's an even more apt description of the beginning of the twenty-first century. Globalisation and the digital media landscape is changing broadcasting in a big way - driven largely by market forces. The result is a quasi-documentary game show like *Survivor*. You're probably familiar with the genre. Sixteen people artificially live on a desert island - each move they make being observed by a camera. There are variations of this program in production across America, Europe and Australia.

If the gradual dumbing-down of television is a world-wide trend (and it certainly appears to be), what can we do about it here in our own country? Proper and adequate funding of our public broadcasters, I believe, is the only way of addressing this problem. Unless this happens, Australian documentary will gradually become an extinct species. If we are no longer able to tell our own stories then the sense of who we are as a nation - will surely be compromised.

References

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