



# Stealing moments

*Tom Zubrycki's Molly and Mobarak*

**KATE NASH**

A woman sits at her kitchen table crying. She tries to explain to the young man sitting opposite her that he must give up any hope of a romantic relationship with her daughter. In the midst of this emotional exchange, as she reaches for a tissue, the woman glances at the camera. The glance lasts only a few frames, but in that moment there is a connection between participant, filmmaker and audience. But how should we interpret this glance? The woman is Lyn Rule and the documentary is *Molly and Mobarak* (2003). For both Rule and the film's creator, Tom Zubrycki, the glance

is significant. The different meanings ascribed to this fleeting glance provide a glimpse into the differing experiences of filmmaker and participant. Power is most often cast as a problem in documentary and is usually considered something the filmmaker possesses and the participant lacks, thus raising ethical and political questions within documentary discourse.<sup>10</sup> This case study reveals power to be more complex, something that constantly traverses the relationship between participant and filmmaker, resulting in ongoing negotiations. Central to this constant renegotiation is trust. In this particular case study, trust

is found to develop slowly and is dependent on mutual values, goals and vulnerabilities.

Australian documentary filmmaker Tom Zubrycki seeks out personal stories, tackling issues by revealing their impact on the people affected and allowing audiences to make an emotional connection with those involved. In 2002 he travelled to Young, in western New South Wales, where ninety Afghan men from the Hazara ethnic minority had settled. This was at the height of debate about the Howard government's immigration policy and Zubrycki wanted to see how the refugees would fare in a country town

where they are 'forced to interact'.<sup>11</sup> The resulting film tells the story of 23-year-old Mobarak Tahiri and his impossible love for schoolteacher Molly Rule. Separated from his own family, Mobarak seeks acceptance in the Rule household. In spite of their good intentions, Molly and Lyn, her mother, ultimately fail to become the family Mobarak craves.

Zubrycki spent time living with the Rules during the film's production. Although the documentary gives a sense of

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**ABOVE:** MOBARAK TAHIRI AND MOLLY RULE



the filmmaker's intimate access to the lives of these women, Molly's performance suggests a degree of ambivalence; she allows the filming to continue but always remains at a distance. In a speech given at the Melbourne International Film Festival, Molly described her participation as something that she continues to feel overwhelmed by.<sup>12</sup>

Studying the stories of documentary participants throws up a range of practical challenges, and on this occasion it was not possible to interview Molly about her experience making *Molly and Mobarak*. Instead, this paper focuses on the relationship between her mother, Lyn, and Zubrycki. This relationship was fundamental to the making of the documentary, and focusing on their experiences highlights their different needs and expectations in relation to the documentary.

### *Glances*

The teary-eyed glance to the camera described earlier is considered important by both Rule and Zubrycki, and both accord this moment particular



significance when discussing the making of the documentary. Their differing accounts, however, draw attention to the contested nature of the participant-filmmaker relationship.

For Zubrycki, the glance to camera was interpreted as a kind of consent giving. He said of the scene in the kitchen that:

*She allowed me to continue and there are reasons for that,*

*I think she realised the relationship between Mobarak and Molly was at the core of the film and that this encounter over the kitchen table was one way in which issues in that relationship could be resolved ... So she was already looking at the film as a story and a story unfolding and electing whether to ... include herself or exclude herself from it.<sup>13</sup>*

*'I'm very chatty so I wouldn't just ignore him, I'd talk to him and make him talk back to me and he'd then have to answer my questions and tell me about himself.'*

LYN RULE

As Rule notes below, the glance has a very different meaning for her.

### *Lyn: control and lack of control*

Lyn Rule's account of her participation in *Molly and Mobarak* centres on control. Speaking with Rule, I was struck by the extent to which she emphasises her active control over her participation. Right from the start she emphasises her agency, describing one of her early meetings with Zubrycki in the following way:

*I'm very chatty so I wouldn't just ignore him, I'd talk to him and make him talk back to me and he'd then have to answer*

*my questions and tell me about himself.<sup>14</sup>*

Rule's reversal of the traditional questioner-questioned relationship within documentary production points to the importance, for her, of power sharing. Her decision to get involved in the project was motivated by a desire to contribute to the asylum seeker debate. She saw herself as more than capable of managing the documentary project:

*Molly and I had spoken about it and said that if we were going to go ahead with it ... I can control that, [the filming] that's nothing, if it's going to do some good.*

As the filming progressed, Rule developed strategies to control what and when filming took place.

*Once he'd start to get things and we didn't want him to, we had little ways of stopping him. Because there are moments of privacy ... when you've just had enough and you think ... you're not going to get this whatever you do ... Molly would put the music on straight away, or I would start swearing or threaten to take my clothes off ... He'd stop filming then.*

Punctuating Rule's narrative of control, however, are descriptions of moments when control was lost. When describing these moments of relative powerlessness, Rule ascribes negative feelings, usually guilt, to Zubrycki. She also describes him as a 'determined' or 'tenacious' filmmaker, saying that 'you can't shake him off if he decides to be there'.

For Rule, the glance towards the camera in the kitchen scene indicates a stolen moment, an example of her loss of control over her participation. Referring to the glance, she notes that Zubrycki has kept it in the film, which, she thinks, 'must really annoy him'.

*I think Tom just came upon it and filmed it and I think I didn't want to break what I had with Mobarak ... Because you*

do have this relationship happening, deep emotional feelings and to break it I would have had to deal with Tom and he probably knew that ... he probably takes advantage of those situations as a filmmaker, I'm sure he does. He'd be full of guilt.

This play of control and lack of control in Rule's narrative is complex. Rule acknowledges that she may be compromising her ability to control by, among other things, allowing Zubrycki to stay in her home. There's a tension here between her feelings of empowerment and powerlessness. She says, for instance:

*You can't be intrusive without their [the participant's] permission and then they'll hate you and you'll feel bad about yourself. And he [Zubrycki] must feel bad, I'm sure he feels bad.*

It is important to stress that Rule and Zubrycki have a close and ongoing relationship, and that Rule's narrative is not a story of regret. She is aware that as a documentary filmmaker, Zubrycki must intrude into participant's lives. 'I think he's naughty,' she says, 'but that's because he's a filmmaker.'

## Trust

To understand how this contested relationship between participant and filmmaker can persist and even flourish, we need to consider trust in documentary. We trust people every day: to drive safely, to prepare our food, to take care of our health. Every time we trust someone, we entrust them with something valuable. We do it because we need other people's help and when we do it we become vulnerable.<sup>15</sup> The documentary participant trusts the filmmaker with some of their most cherished possessions including personal information, reputation and image. In doing so, they become vulnerable to the loss of these core assets.

When we trust, we make the assumption that the person we trust will display goodwill



towards us, that we can rely on them to consider our needs, interests and preferences.<sup>16</sup> Rule's ideas about trust demonstrate the participant's vulnerability and the importance of respect.

*[Trust is] probably to do with knowing that that person that you have the relationship with will not knowingly betray you with the knowledge they have of you. You know when people have knowledge of you and they can turn it around and use it against you.*

Betrayal, for Rule, is defined as the filmmaker's failure to hold the beliefs of the participant as sacred, '[K]nowing that that trust is there, that that person will hold your beliefs and feelings as sacred really. And I had that with Tom. I do trust him.'

Another important feature of trust to emerge from Rule's story is the extent to which it relies on a shared sense of purpose in relation to the documentary project. She spoke about seeing

Zubrycki's earlier documentaries as a turning point in their relationship. Importantly, these documentaries served as evidence of shared values and the potential of documentary to make an important contribution to political discussions at the time. There is a tendency for documentary filmmakers to be suspicious of participants with strong motives, and yet within Rule's narrative it is clear that shared goals constitute an important foundation for the trust that makes documentary possible.

While Rule's understanding of trust reflects the risk she takes – the risk of betrayal – Zubrycki's description of trust reflects his vulnerability, particularly the potential loss of access to the participant.

*Getting their trust is really getting a person's cooperation. It's them understanding that you're not going to exploit them in any way by being selective ... If they feel like they can manage their own image and if they feel that you can be a kind of conduit or attentive to their need to come across in a particular way and then they become cooperative and that's the basis upon which trust can be built.*

The filmmaker's access to

the participant is never guaranteed and must be constantly re-negotiated. Trust serves as the foundation for this constant negotiation.

*It's actually very stressful because you're not absolutely sure that that person has allowed you into their lives completely, because there's always that possibility that they could ring up and say, 'That's it. It's been a great few months but I think that I've reached the end of the road for whatever reason,' but, touch wood, that hasn't happened yet.*

For Zubrycki, the importance of trust and the need to establish a trusting relationship with the participant leads to a form of performance. As a filmmaker, he is conscious of the need to engage the participant in order to achieve his filmmaking ends.

*It's almost also like you become somebody else ... it's kind of a performance of some kind, but it's really deciding that you're aspiring to forge a relationship ... you're focusing on being attentive, you're focusing on being interested, of understanding, of responding,*

ALL IMAGES FROM MOLLY AND MOBARAK

of being empathetic. And you really are searching for a very strong connection ... finding things that might be in common with the person that you're working with and relying on those but also making yourself to be an interesting person for the other.

Documentary trust develops slowly as participant and filmmaker become enmeshed in the life of the other. This is particularly evident in observational documentary where participant and filmmaker can find themselves living and working closely together over many months. For Rule, meeting Zubrycki's family and becoming part of his life is associated with her growing trust in him as a filmmaker.

*Interviewer: Was there a single moment when you felt that trust?*

*Rule: Maybe when I met his parents and his dad, yeah, when he probably invited me into his life and trusted me with his family. His dad, his ageing parents, that's probably [when]. That's a big thing ... It's taking that next step into someone's life, isn't it?*

As a trusting relationship develops there is an opening up to the other. There is mutual vulnerability as both filmmaker and participant allow the other into their lives. Rule was aware that she was being trusted with knowledge of Zubrycki's family but was less conscious of her own power in the relationship and the extent of Zubrycki's vulnerability as a documentary filmmaker.

### *Consent and the right of veto*

Informed consent has become a touchstone of documentary ethics.<sup>17</sup> For both filmmaker and participant it has been ritualised in the form of the release form. This case study demonstrates that this institutional requirement cuts across the relationship between filmmaker and participant and can cause anxiety and

distress.

Rule signed a release form covering her participation in *Molly and Mobarak* before shooting had finished, and well before she had any idea that the documentary would focus on the relationship between Molly and Mobarak. Her consent was, at best, prior consent, since it did not meet the informational requirements of informed consent.

Rule's story about signing a release form in relation to *Molly and Mobarak* stands out in her narrative because it is so abrupt:

*I can just remember his car being out the front of my place and he dragged out a form and said 'you'll have to sign this form'.*

When Rule elaborated on this she raised concerns about the way in which she felt disempowered in signing the form.

*I was a bit aware of the contract and what it entitled him to and what it didn't entitle me to, and it is, it doesn't make you feel good because you're giving away all your rights really, you don't have any rights. All of that is then his, oh well it was really SBS's.*

Rule recognises the release as empowering, but only in one moment. Once the form is signed, however, the relations of power are altered.

Like Rule, Zubrycki experiences the giving of release forms as an uncomfortable process that cuts across the developing relationship between participant and filmmaker. For him, the release form replaces the trust relationship with a relationship based on a legal contract.

*Interviewer: How do you feel giving [the release forms] out? What does that feel like?*

*Zubrycki: Oh, it's almost like you're enslaving them or that they might feel enslaved by it. It's a terrifying thought. You have to step outside the relationship that you've been cultivating, one of trust, to one of direct dealing with people.*

Rule feels that she did give informed consent to her participation in *Molly and Mobarak*, but not by signing a release form. More significant for her was Zubrycki's offer of a right of veto. In Rule's narrative, the offer of veto rights returns a degree of active agency to the participant. In speaking about her decision to consent to the film, Rule refers to her discussions with Molly about the documentary and its likely consequences – the hallmarks of informed consent.

For Zubrycki, giving participants a right of veto is central to ethical observational documentary making. He argues that observational documentary raises distinct ethical issues because it involves representing people, not just in terms of what they say, but also in terms of what they believe and how they feel.<sup>18</sup> This extra dimension of observational representation requires that participants be given more control over their appearance in the documentary.

Zubrycki acknowledges that in offering participants a right of veto he is sometimes at odds with the demands of broadcasters and funding bodies. This constitutes a tension that has an impact on his relationship with participants.

### *Conclusions*

To return to Bill Nichols' question, what is it that we do with people when we make a documentary? This case study offers just a glimpse into the relationship between participant and documentary filmmaker. Rule's narrative demonstrates the importance of the participant's goal in relation to their participation and, to some extent, their ownership of the project. Power circulates in the relationship as filmmaker and participant pursue their own visions for the project.

Trust is fundamental to documentary because it is inherently risky. Both filmmaker

and participant make themselves vulnerable within the relationship. Shared goals and a mutual opening up to the other allow trust to emerge gradually in the relationship. In terms of practice, this study draws attention to problems surrounding release forms and the ethical significance, for both filmmaker and participant, of veto rights.<sup>19</sup>

Rule's story points to the importance of the participant's needs in relation to the documentary project. It underscores the value of effective communication between filmmaker and participant in which the needs and expectations of each are considered. Where the documentary relationship is oriented towards meeting the needs of both parties, participation is likely to be a positive experience.

Both Lyn Rule and Tom Zubrycki were involved in the analysis of their narratives as presented here. They describe each other as friends and spoke about their infrequent but welcome contact. The intensity of the documentary relationship has given way to occasional visits and phone calls. On the question of trust, Lyn added the following:

*Trust was something I still have in Tom ... basic, good, honest trust in his intent and where it resides.*<sup>20</sup>

Zubrycki says of observational documentary that it is virtually impossible not to become emotionally caught up in what is happening in front of the camera.<sup>21</sup> His willingness to hold a mirror up to his own documentary practice demonstrates a significant commitment to ethical practice.

*This article was refereed.*

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, Peter Jaszi & Mridu Chandra, 'Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on the Ethical Challenges in Their Work', Center for Social Media, <[www.centerforsocialmedia.org/.../honest\\_truths\\_documentary\\_filmmakers\\_on\\_ethical\\_challenges\\_in\\_their\\_work](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/.../honest_truths_documentary_filmmakers_on_ethical_challenges_in_their_work)>, accessed 10 June 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> Trish FitzSimons, 'Braided Channels: A Genealogy of the Voice of Documentary', *Studies in Documentary Film*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp.131–146.
- <sup>3</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2001, p.5.
- <sup>4</sup> Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary*

*Film Revisited*, British Film Institute Publishing, London, 1995, p.240.

- <sup>5</sup> Matthew Nisbet & Patricia Aufderheide, 'Documentary Film: Towards a Research Agenda on Forms, Functions and Impacts', *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2009, pp.450–456.
- <sup>6</sup> Corinne Squire, 'Experience-Centred and Culturally-Oriented Approaches to Narrative', in Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire & Maria Tamboukou (eds), *Doing Narrative Research*, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles and London, 2008, pp.41–64.
- <sup>7</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1991.
- <sup>8</sup> See Kate Nash, *Beyond the Frame: A Study in*

*Observational Documentary Ethics*, PhD thesis, University of New England, Armidale, unpublished, 2009.

- <sup>9</sup> Bob Connolly quoted in James Brown, 'Facing Bob: An Interview with Bob Connolly', *Metro*, no. 129/130, 2001, p.112.
- <sup>10</sup> Brian Winston, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentary*, BFI Publishing, London, 2000.
- <sup>11</sup> Joan Robinson, 'Molly and Mobarak: A Subversive Act', *Australian Screen Education*, no. 33, 2003, pp.64–66.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.65.
- <sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, quotes from Tom Zubrycki are taken from an interview with the author conducted on 24 April 2008.
- <sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, quotes from Lyn Rule are taken from an interview with

the author conducted 17 April 2008.

- <sup>15</sup> Annette Baier, 'Trust and Antitrust', in Diana Tietjens Meyers (ed), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, Routledge, New York & London, 1997, pp.604–630.
- <sup>16</sup> Barbara Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, p.22.
- <sup>17</sup> See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, *op. cit.*, p.10; Winston, *op. cit.*, p.138.
- <sup>18</sup> Robinson, *op. cit.*, p.67.
- <sup>19</sup> Veto rights were an important feature of ethical practice for all the filmmakers and participants interviewed as part of this study.
- <sup>20</sup> Lyn Rule, comment to author, 24 October 2008.
- <sup>21</sup> Tom Zubrycki, comment to author, 2 November 2008.

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