'Ahead of history' - the documentary filmmaker in the age of extremes

The 2000 NSW Premier's History Awards Address

by Tom Zubrycki

In his book *Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* 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 is not dissimilar to a contemporary historian. Yet observing and listening is only the raw material of making documentary films. The other part is structuring a story, a narrative, with a point of view.

When I started making films there was already an established tradition of documentary - albeit a modest one. The Commonwealth Film Unit (now Film Australia) was formed in the 1930s. The documentaries were largely nation-building propaganda - they were films that reflected construction, progress and prosperity. There were oppositional voices like the Waterside Workers' Film Unit making films about conditions on the waterfront, plus a few anthropologists aiming their cameras at Aboriginal communities, and there was ABC's Chequerboard But documentary, I believe, didn't properly get going until government intervention in the late 60's ushered in the Australian film renaissance.

I came to filmmaking from sociology - which was a great foundation - but I had to acquire a whole new range of skills. The period was the early 70s. We were all idealists, and like most people at that time, we looked overseas for stimulation. We read about Canada and how film was being used to give voice to the voiceless. Film makers were using the first early video cameras whicb were cumbersome and only just mobile, but they produced crisp black and white images, and videotape was much cheaper than film. Editing machinery was also primitive but it was a great way to make short films on local issues that mattered to people - we showed them in pubs, halls or simply in the street. They were ephemeral - like pamphlets that you could put aside and later throw away. Eventually I felt frustrated not being able to reach larger audiences and it made me more ambitious. After four years and a steep learning curve I made my first film, *Waterloo*, about the Sydney

suburb of the same name. Soon after came my second film, *Kemira - Diary of a Strike.*

Wollongong brings back many memories for me. You may recall that, back in 1982, 31 miners staged a sit-in strike over sixteen days in the Kemira colliery - not far from Bulli - in protest against being given retrenchment notices by BHP. The strike galvanised the whole community and a trainload of miners set off in very high spirits to Canberra. They arrived on a warm October day, walked from the station to old Parliament House, knocked over the flimsy barrier, and then proceeded to break the front glass doors. Malcolm Fraser, incidentally, was not impressed, and some historians now say it signalled the beginning of the end for the Liberal government.

Sensing it as a historical turning point I decided to use it as a corner stone of a film about the strike. I continued filming using a credit card 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 often not as exciting 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. We secured our funding and completed the film, which was critically applauded and won several awards. It was even sold to the ABC - rare in those days for an Australian-produced documentary.

Before I go on, I should distinguish between documentary filmmaking and news and current affairs reportage. For a start, the time-scale is quite different. *Kemira* took a year and a half to complete. It took eighteen months to raise the funds for my last film, *The Diplomat* (about the East Timorese leader José Ramos Horta), and another two years from the start of filming to the finished work. An in-depth current affairs report, however, normally usually takes between 2 and 8 weeks to make. For documentary film makers there is room for much analysis, reflection, and a lot of 'watching and listening'.

Kemira gave me credibility and a reputation as a documentarian sympathetic to the labour movement. It gave me access to places and people that otherwise would have been difficult. My instinct was to exploit that access - so I went to Queensland! Something major was brewing: the electricity union had thrown down the gauntlet to the Bjelke-Petersen dictatorship.

It was February 1985. Over 1,000 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 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 who ranted and raved, turning his aggression against the union officials and accusing them of mishandling the strike. By the eighth month of dispute Bernie was growing more and more vociferous but it backfired on him. Even his wife turned against him. To top it off, the ACTU got involved and came up with a deal to save a fraction of the jobs. Naturally it was condemned as a sell-out by the striking linesmen.

I knew this 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.

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 allegedly misrepresenting him and 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 to the strikers by not presenting Bernie in a 100% positive light? Is it not more important to have an honest portrayal?
Twelve months after the strike had collapsed it had already passed into history and people already had diametrically opposing interpretations of what had taken place. In this context, 'history' could not be thought of as a static entity: it was an organic and fluid force. I can theorise about it now, but back then I was shattered. As a filmmaker you always want your film to be loved, or at least accepted. On the opening night it had been completely disassembled.

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. Money was available through the Bicentennial Authority for major 'once in a lifetime' projects and I convinced both Film Australia and the ACTU to support my next idea.

Approval was given, and I took on the task, consulting with historians, writing draft scripts and then shooting and editing the film. Eventually the fine-cut *Amongst Equals* was born. That was when the trouble started. The ACTU obfuscated and delayed giving the final approval until 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 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 took legal advice and 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.

I decided to give unions a rest 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 was a refugee family, newly arrived from El Salvador and living in Melbourne's Moonee Ponds, and the second was a Lebanese family living in Sydney's western suburbs. Both were personal studies about families responding to a crisis. Each required more than eighteen months research and filming.

The first film, *Homelands*, shows how refugee families can be torn between a practical need to stay in Australia and an emotional desire to return to the countries from which they had fled. Maria and Carlos had spent six years re-making their lives in Australia. By the time the twelve year civil war in El Salvador had come to an end Maria had a professional position here. Carlos, however, was still working as a cleaner and could hardly speak any English. Their four children had settled in well at the local schools.

A month after we started filming Carlos returned to El Salvador to help in the reconstruction. Six months went by - no Carlos! The family awaited his return, as I did, because without his homecoming I was unable to finish the film. Maria decided to go to El Salvador and track him down. I went with her and filmed her discovering that Carlos had started an affair with a woman in a local village. I felt very uneasy filming what seemed like a looming marriage break-up. It became an ethical dilemma – should I stop or keep going. I chose to continue - recording how the family coped with their changed circumstances. I felt that Maria and Carlos should be given the right to pass comment on the near-completed film about their own lives, even to the point of vetoing it. For me as a filmmaker sitting with them around the editing machine was an extremely confronting moment. Fortunately the family approved the film with very minor alterations.

Billal, the second long and in-depth study of a family, fell into my lap 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. In early 1995 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. We forged a relationship with the family which went beyond the film itself. By combining the roles of

filmmaker and advocate, I believe we overcame the ethical dilemma that presented itself when somebody else's trauma becomes the subject of our 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 the Melbourne theatre director Tahir Cambis. Tahir hadn't made a film before, but the concept was a strong one. He 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. The previous year Cambis had tried to reach Sarajevo but was injured by an exploding mine. I knew he was serious and it 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 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 very strong vision and I supplied him with a very experienced editor. The film, which became known as *Exile In Sarajevo*, was a very personal and poetic homage to the city, as well as a bitter attack on those whom he felt 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 another producer. Did I want to direct a film about East Timorese leader José Ramos Horta? I leapt at the chance and *The Diplomat* project was born.

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 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 trauma that gave rise to the birth of a new nation.

Filming with José was not easy. It was like looking for cracks between the private and the public - so completely different from *Homelands* and *Billal* where people were completely open and honest. Filming interviews with José was like witnessing a performance. He said what he wanted to say and what he felt was politically appropriate at that moment. Often he would chastise me. 'When will this film be finished?' he kept asking. As far as he was concerned any film on East Timor had to be made quickly so it could be used as propaganda against the Indonesians. He felt uncomfortable with the film being a personal profile, although this was the original understanding.

My 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 a 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, and in an ideal world, 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 20 th century. I believe its an even more apt description of the beginning of our 21st century. Globalisation and the information revolution is already changing broadcasting in a big way driven largely by market forces. . Quasi

documentary game shows like SURVIVOR are sweeping commercial television. You've probably seen the programme – 12 people on a desert island, and each week the group votes for one person to be thrown off the Island. The person left wins the jackpot. There are several of variations of this programme being shown or in production across America, Europe and soon Australia. As a country we I believe we have a choice - either being submerged by crude, banal global culture lacking in creativity or imagination or defending our public broadcasters and monitoring their commitment to excellence, because unless we do the later our documentaries will become extinct and our Australian identity will become compromised.

References

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TOM ZUBRYCKI
has one of the most distinguished careers in Australian documentary making. Since the late 1970s he has produced a major body of films that have been widely exhibited in Australia and overseas.

Tom taught Sociology at the University of NSW in the early 1970s. He was a foundation member of the early video movement in Sydney. Using black and white 'porta-paks', he made issue-based advocacy videos at the behest of trade unions and communities in inner Sydney. He directed, shot and edited his own programs.

Tom's first films reflected his concerns with issues of power and institutional accountability and focused on people who were the victims of these processes. *Waterloo*, his first film, was an historical account of a fifty year battle by residents of an inner Sydney suburb to save their community from slum clearance and redevelopment. His second film, *Kemira - Diary of a Strike* (1984), was an account of a sixteen day underground colliery sit-in strike mirrored through one of the families of the striking miners. Following the success of these two films, Tom was awarded one of the inaugural Australian Film Commission's Documentary Fellowships 'to encourage the pursuit of innovation and excellence in documentary cinema'. The Fellowship enabled him to make *Friends and Enemies*, an account of a year-long industrial dispute in Queensland shot from both sides.

In the 1990s Tom's films focused on the domestic front and the damage done to families by migration, community conflict and social change. *Homelands* (1993) was a story about a refugee family from El Salvador and *Billal* (1996) followed the aftermath of a 'hit and run' incident in Sydney's western suburbs involving a Lebanese boy and his family.

In his latest film as director, *The Diplomat*, Tom returned to observing the political process, making an intimate profile of the Timorese exiled leader José Ramos Horta.

Since the mid 1990s Tom has also been working as a producer. His credits include *Exile in Sarajevo* (1997), *Dr Jazz* (1998), *Whiteys Like Us* (1999) and *Stolen Generations* (2000).

Tom has received numerous awards for his films, including an International Emmy for Best Documentary for *Exile in Sarajevo* and an AFI award for Best Documentary for *Kemira - Diary of a Strike*. He has also received five other Best Documentary nominations.

Apart from his work as director and producer Tom has worked as a consultant for SBS Independent and teaches occasional courses in documentary at the Australian Film, TV and Radio School.

Director credits include *Waterloo* (1981), *Kemira – Diary of a Strike* (1984), *Friends and Enemies* (1987), *Amongst Equals* (1988), *Lord of the Bush* (1990), *Bran Nue Dae* (1991), *Homelands* (1993), *Billal* (1996) and *The Diplomat* (2000). Producer credits include *Exile in Sarajevo* (1996), *Dr Jazz* (1998), *Whiteys Like Us* (1999) and *Stolen Generations* (2000).