

From Video to Film and Back Again

Tom Zubrycki

The digital camcorder is set to make a big impact on documentary filmmaking and the television industry in general. But will it be a democratising force in communication? Will it empower ordinary people or will it break down the ethical boundaries of human privacy? These are the questions I and other filmmakers are beginning to ask.

'Empowerment, communication ...' This same rhetoric was around in the '70s when I started my filmmaking career and when the portable video recording unit was first invented. This was the black and white porta-pak, which 15 years later became the camcorder.

I was reading media guru Marshall McLuhan at the time. McLuhan had turned against all the claims made in the '50s and '60s that television was turning viewers into passive zombies. Instead, he contended that television was inaugurating new forms of interactivity and 'do-it-yourself' participation, and that the globalizing process of the television revolution would be balanced by a decentralising force that would democratise communications. It was McLuhan's rhetoric that in the late '60s stimulated a visionary experiment that had its origin in Canada. It was called "Challenge for Change".

I read about "Challenge for Change" long before I saw anything that had been produced. It was supposedly a government scheme that: *gave the disenfranchised and marginal communities of Canada a voice by giving them access to the media ... to improve communications, create greater understanding, promote new ideas and provoke social change.*

(National Film Board)

This approach was a break away from the paternalistic style of many Canadian National Film Board (NFB) films at the time (copied by Film Australia), where the subject was brought to the camera in the mould of John Grierson. Location videotape recording meant the cost factor of shooting sync-sound interviews was negligible. Some filmmakers inside the NFB seized on this as a way of giving people a voice, particularly the disadvantaged.



However, the idea was rather than making films *about* disadvantaged groups, they were to make films *with* them. By re-defining the role of viewer into an active participant, the programme involved a radical re-evaluation of the role of filmmaker. No longer an authorial agent, the director became a 'video animator' whose chief function was to provide technical training to select communities. The emphasis, however, was not on forging a new style but on an ethical engagement with the processes of representation.

If we really believed in people's right to express themselves directly, then we needed to elimi-

nate ourselves from the process and find a way of putting the media directly into the hands of citizens.

Dorothy Henaut (NFB)

The aims of fostering community participation, creating greater understanding and promoting new ideas were seized by Whitlam's social engineers when they installed Video Access Centres in Sydney and Melbourne's western suburbs. Ironically,

as soon as the programme was starting to slow down in Canada, here in Australia it was just being born!

Almost from the moment these porta-paks became available they were put to use in the original "Challenge for Change" spirit. In fact, the first uses of the medium could be described as 'agit prop' (in the Soviet 'Kino-Pravda' tradition). Early videomakers, including myself, worked with local resident action groups (RAGs as they were known), but rather than putting video cameras directly in the hands of community groups, we made ourselves available to work *at the behest of those groups.*

Billal by Tom Zubrycki

tiveness of this technology allowed very limited application apart from the agit-prop use. Distribution was also limited because video players were still very scarce.

A number of us decided that rather than short-term political interventions, it was important to make finished films and circulate them as widely as possible. It was to be a twist on what Grierson always proposed should be the ultimate aim of documentary – making individuals into better citizens. Our avowed goal was to change the status quo and make those citizens activists. Paradoxically, the first works in this oppositional manner were only made possible when independent documentary first started to receive government support. Films like *Woolloomooloo*, *Rocking the Foundations*, *For Love or Money*, and my own *Waterloo* were made, and The Sydney Filmmakers Co-op sprang into existence to distribute them.

It was at this time that I became influenced by American documentary-makers – D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, the Maysles Brothers – and Australian ethnographic filmmakers Judith and David Macdougall. They became my mentors. Films like *Primary*, *Salesman*, *Takeover* affected me greatly, and I responded to their simple but effective narrative structures. For a while I rather fancied the idea of the camera being a simple objective recording device; however, a few years later I realised the camera was far from neutral! Yet I made several films borrowing from this style, *Kemira – Diary of a Strike* and *Friends & Enemies* are the most notable. But unlike my mentors of the '70s, I was not content to just be a fly on-the-wall. Besides observation, I used a whole range of devices: re-enactments, reflexive camera. I also felt that the material could be highly constructed in the editing, and that this is where the director's stamp could be best applied.

By the time I started making *Homelands* I'd refined a narrative-driven observational style. All my films up to this point were event-based. Using tact, diplomacy and intuition, I usually managed to access a strategic vantage point in order to observe the human and social drama unfolding around me. For example, the pit-top in *Kemira*, or the kitchen of the union office in *Friends & Enemies*. Typically,

I would start filming even before I discovered the key subjects that were to carry the story. This is how Ngaire Wiltshire in *Kemira* and Bernie Neville in *Friends & Enemies* came to be.

Homelands, however, marked a point of departure – more of approach than style or subject matter. Rather than entering an event that was already unfolding, and personalising it, I wanted to find the subjects first. My aim was to track down people who were about to undergo a process of fundamental change in their lives, something forced on them by events

my key subjects: Maria and Carlos Robles and their four daughters. Carlos' decision to leave Australia for six months to work in El Salvador had the potential of impacting on the family in a way that would reverberate for a long time. Here was a potentially good event-driven narrative structure. There was nothing more than intuition, but it was enough for me to begin shooting. As it was, much more happened than I ever dreamt or suspected. The element of serendipity never ceases to excite me about this style of documentary, but the stress and the



outside their control. I wanted to be around to film this process as it unfolded in real time. This required a different working style. I needed to base myself for quite some time in a particular community to do some detailed and careful research, a methodology akin to that of a social anthropologist.

Each one of my films starts with an idea that reflects an issue of social and political concern. *Homelands* is no exception. In 1991, I was interested in the issue of refugees and how war-related trauma influenced their re-settling in a new country. I'd become aware that the civil war in El Salvador was finally coming to an abrupt end, and I had a feeling this event would have disruptive consequences on the exile community.

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Two years ago I thought I was one of the few documentary filmmakers in Australia left working in a predominantly vérité style. But then the camcorder revolution suddenly arrived. Vérité and event-driven films are suddenly back in vogue again! Graham Chase's film on the West Australian ex-Labor politician Graeme Campbell is one of the first ones made in this style. (Graham does his own shooting, and edits on a cheap non-linear system attached to his own computer). After 20 years, 'video access' suddenly has a new meaning.

While there are distinct benefits arising from these new technological advances, there are also significant drawbacks. The ready availability of low-cost digital vision cameras has suddenly meant that filmmakers are able to start shooting without first

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While there are distinct benefits arising from these new technological advances, there are also significant drawbacks. The ready availability of low-cost digital vision cameras has suddenly meant that filmmakers are able to start shooting without first

needing to go to a broadcaster to seek initial approval. That can be done later! Broadcasters may choose to pre-purchase fewer programmes and buy more on rough cut or at completion. The impact will be that budgets will drop as will filmmakers' salaries, and this will be reflected in a drop in overall quality, as people cut corners to make programmes more quickly. But the new technology has also spawned further developments removing the director from the production process entirely. I'm referring to the camcorder-driven video diary!

Video diaries began in Britain in the early part of the '90s when the video 8 camera first hit the market. Australia has been slow on the uptake and SBS's *First Person* has been the first cab off the rank. Six people were selected from 100 volunteers to record their lives during a six month period, using a camcorder which the broadcaster supplied. 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. The diarists kept in regular touch with an SBS series producer who, from what I understand, guided them in a semi-directorial fashion. The participants were theoretically given total veto rights - if they didn't like something, they could change it. Bernice, sat with the editor for several weeks. The result and programme is harrowing, riveting and, seemingly for Bernice, psychologically empowering. Yet this was not always the case. For one diarist the very reverse was true.

Barrie, the compulsive gambler, lives with his girlfriend Maureen and young child. The couple argue a lot - over money - and as the film unfolds, the camera becomes a powerful weapon that each person uses against the other. Occasionally, each confides to 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 and screams. However, when the crunch came to involve Barrie and Maureen in the editing, this didn't happen. Barrie claimed in an article in *The Australian* (20/5/96) that he 'wasn't given the chance'. 'The film', he says, portrayed him as a 'single-dimensional gambling nut case, and ignores the family's good times. It's a myopic view...'

I would be the first to acknowledge that a certain degree of voyeurism is intrinsic to documentary; how-



ever, reports like that cause me to be in two minds about the series. It's almost as if the producers had cut each episode in order to push aspects of the diarist's personality that are difficult or confronting. A basic ethical principle in documentary is that the subjects should not be humiliated by the experience; they should not leave a film with lowered self-esteem and social respect. Giving the participants total veto rights is a brave and unprecedented move by a broadcaster, but they should have followed it right through to the end. Interestingly, I learnt later that this program and others in the series returned SBS very respectable ratings.

Having started as a filmmaker using the primitive video technology of 20 years ago, these new developments present interesting paradoxes for me.

Times have obviously changed and so has the social context. The value system now prevalent in this post-modernist period puts the emphasis on the individual rather than on the community. Video, rather than facilitating social interaction, appears to be facilitating psycho-drama. 'Access' has a new meaning.

If video diaries are a preview of the future, are documentaries going to be subsumed by this new trend? The danger signs are obvious: not only are video diaries a cheap way of making quasi-docos, but by raising so many ethical problematics, they may also compromise the integrity of the form.

I'm not pretending that ethical controversies have not plagued documentary. They have. A case in point was Frederick Wiseman's first film, *Titicut Follies* (1967). This film caused a huge stir when Bridgewater, the mental institution where the film was shot, slammed an injunction against the film preventing its release for more than 20 years. (With voyeuristic shots of naked men humiliated by the male nurses, one can understand why.) It was a shocking experience, and allegedly, consent to film was improperly given. However, Wiseman and others have since mounted a powerful argument defending the film on the basis of important public interest.

Filming the private domain is a complex issue and the debate around it has led to a set of ethical standards, evolved over the years by documentary filmmakers, based on a strongly collaborative model and a notion of 'informed consent'. 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 started between two neighbours: windows were broken, rocks thrown, a few black eyes and people arrested. The next day it turned nasty. A 16 year-old Lebanese boy, Billal, was run-over. It was a criminal act with distinct racist as-

Above: *Homelands* by Tom Zubrycki
Left: *Friends and Enemies*

pects to it. The film begins with Billal in a coma in hospital and follows him and his family as they sort out their shattered lives over the ensuing 15 months.

My film is a subjective interpretation of what happened, 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 to the main participants as we neared completion. I wanted to make sure the film's content and emphasis was not inconsistent with the way the family itself had experienced the events. The issue was to ensure I was not misrepresenting 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 its inclusion was not going to have any negative repercussions for the family.

As we approach the late 20th century, I believe that for documentary the relationship between the filmmaker and the participants will be ever more crucial; 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 that implied passivity on behalf of the subject have all changed. The democratisation that digital vision has introduced means documentary filmmaking has to be viewed differently. This inevitably clouds the position of filmmaker as the author and all-powerful artist. Filmmaking becomes a collaborative process which has to include the subjects of the film, and in cases where the filmmaker continues to have ultimate power then 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. Brian Winston, in a new book I read recently, *Claiming the Real*, summed it all up in a rather provocative way:

Once the filmmaker is liberated from implications of actuality, then ethical behaviour becomes much more crucial than ever before ... Free of the need to be objective there is no reason why

... the documentarist could not put the relationship with participants on the pedestal.

Tom Zubrycki: A Short Biography

Tom Zubrycki was teaching Sociology at the University of NSW in the early '70s when he became interested in Canadian-based experiments on the application of film and video to facilitate community expression and political change.

Zubrycki became a formative member of the early video movement in Sydney. He utilised black-and-white 'porta-paks' to make issue-based, advocacy videos at the behest of inner-Sydney communities and trade unions. He directed, shot and edited his own programmes. He continued in this way to develop his filmmaking skills until he became frustrated with video's early technical limitations, and eventually made the switch to film in the late '70s.

The films of Zubrycki reflect his concerns with the issues of power and institutional accountability, and focus on people who are victims of institutional processes. *Waterloo*, his first film, is a historical account of a 50-year battle by residents of an inner-Sydney suburb to save their community from slum clearance and redevelopment. The film won the Greater Union prize for Best Documentary at the Sydney Film Festival in 1981.

Zubrycki was subsequently influenced by cinema vérité, but was critical of a trend towards pure ethnicity, which risked disengaging the viewer. He opted to make character-driven films around incidents which involved conflict and unfolded before the camera, often for more than a year. A good example is *Kemira - Diary of a Strike*, which won an AFI Award for Best Documentary in 1984. That same year he was one of the inaugural recipients of an AFC Documentary Fellowship, 'to encourage the pursuit of innovation and excellence in documentary cinema'. The fellowship enabled him to make *Friends & Enemies*.

Zubrycki has always been interested in carving out new and difficult subject areas for Australian documentaries. His working method remains the same: the film's construction on the editing bench keeps pace with the actual filming. His recent films have become more reflexive and the narra-

tive strategies more complex. One such film, *Homelands* (1993), is a story about a refugee family from El Salvador torn by the desire to remain in Australia or return to the homeland. The film played at festivals world-wide, and in Australia it received the Film Critics' Circle Award for Best Documentary.

This year he completed *Billal*, which premiered at the Sydney Film Festival and has played at the Melbourne and Brisbane international film festivals. *Billal* follows the dramatic aftermath of a 'hit-and-run' incident in Sydney's western suburbs involving a 16 year-old Lebanese boy and his family.

In the last 10 years Zubrycki has been an active member of the Australian Screen Directors Association, serving on the board and acting as the convenor of the Documentary Committee. He also lectures part-time at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School.

Filmography:

1996: *Billal* (88 mins) A story which follows the dramatic twists in the life of a Lebanese family as they cope with the trauma of their brain-injured son, Billal, the victim of a 'hit-and-run' by an Anglo-Australian teenage driver. **Festivals:** Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane.

1993: *Homelands* (76 mins) The story of a refugee family from El Salvador living in Melbourne torn by the desire to remain in Australia or return to the homeland. **Awards:** Film Critics' Circle of Australia Award for Best Australian Documentary 1993; Nomination for Best Documentary, 1993 AFI Awards; Audience vote for Best Australian Documentary, 1993 Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals. **Festivals:** Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Nyon, Cinema Du Reel (Paris), Bombay, Seattle, Margaret Mead, Festival Dei Populi (Florence), Chicago. **Australian Distributor:** Film Australia.

1991: *Bran Nue Dae* (55 mins) A film about Broome Aboriginal playwright Jimmy Chi and the production of his musical by the same name. **Festivals:** Melbourne, Montreux, Hawaii. **Australian Distributor:** Ronin.

1990: *Lord of the Bush* (55 mins) A portrait of eccentric British developer Lord McAlpine and his new-found domain of Broome. **Awards:** Nomination for Best Documentary, 1990 AFI

Awards; High Commendation plus General Award in Documentary Category and Highly Commended in Australian Category for 1990 ATOM Awards. **Festivals:** Melbourne, Cinema du Reel (Paris). **Australian Distributor:** AFI.

1989: Strangers in Paradise (50 mins) Co-producer and co-director Gil Scrine. Twelve American and British tourists go on a ten-day guided tour of Australia at the height of the Bicentennial celebrations, and come across Aboriginal Australians. **Festivals:** Melbourne. **Australian Distributor:** VEA.

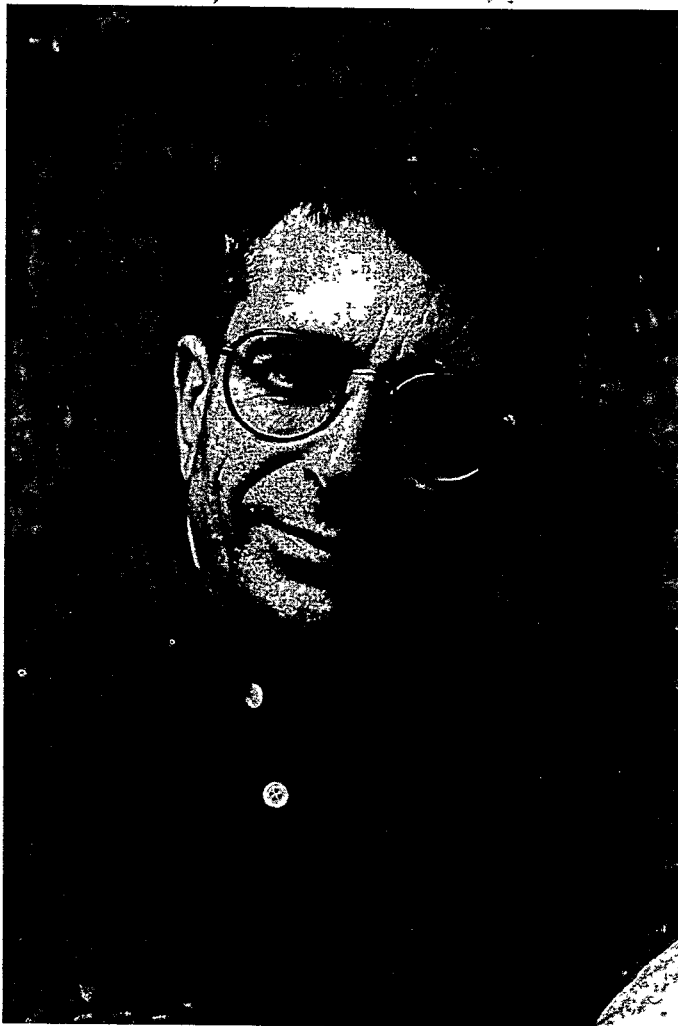
1988: Marrickville (30 mins) A profile of the inner-Sydney suburb of Marrickville and its diverse ethnic community. Funded by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and produced for the SBS *Mosaic* program. **Amongst Equals** (90 mins) An archival-based film of the history of the Australian Trade Union movement. Released in controversial circumstances by the filmmaker in 1991 after the ACTU attempted to censor and re-cut the film. **Festivals:** Melbourne. **Australian distributor:** JOTZ Productions, 171 Elswick Street, Leichhardt, 2040

1987: Friends & Enemies (90 mins) Blow by blow account of a year-long industrial dispute in Queensland seen through two main characters, who personify two opposing sides of the strike. Made under the AFC/ABC Documentary Fellowship Scheme. **Awards:** Nomination for Best Documentary, 1987 AFI Awards. **Festivals:** Sydney, Melbourne, San Francisco, London, Leipzig, Rotterdam, Margaret Mead. **Australian Distributor:** Ronin.

1984: Kemira - Diary of a Strike (63 mins) A day-by-day account of a 16 day underground Wollongong colliery 'sit-in' strike, mirrored through one of the families of the striking miners. **Awards:** Best Documentary, 1984 AFI Awards; Best Short Film, Tyneside Film

Festival (UK); Silver Bear, Leipzig; High Commendation, ATOM Awards. **Festivals:** Sydney, Melbourne, Tyneside, Berlin (Forum for Young Cinema), San Francisco, London, Nyon, Leipzig, Festival Dei Populi (Florence). **Australian Distributor:** AFI.

1981: Waterloo (50 mins) A historical account of a 50-year battle by residents of an inner-Sydney suburb



to save their community from redevelopment by state housing authorities. **Awards:** Best Documentary, Greater Union Awards, Sydney Film Festival. **Festivals:** Sydney, Nyon, Bilbao, Melbourne, Chicago, Festival Dei Populi (Florence). **Australian Distributor:** AFI.

Videotapes originated on B&W portapak

Available through the National Film & Sound Archive and also held by the filmmaker on VHS.

1979: Port Botany: A Planning Dilemma (50 mins) Impact of the rapid port infrastructure development on the community and the fragile physical environment of the bay.

Sack Black - Struggle for democracy in the BLF (40 mins) An account of an election inside one of Australia's most militant unions (co-directed with Russ Hermann)

1977: Addison Rd. Drop In (25 mins) A process video designed to help community groups (mainly ethnic based) of Marrickville, Sydney to decide on the occupancy of a large site formerly owned by the Federal defence forces.

1976: Painters & Dockers Strike (30 mins), co-directed with Russ Hermann. A video giving a blow-by-blow account of a 13 week long strike by shipworkers in an effort to improve dangerous working conditions.

Collingwood Community School (20 mins) A profile of a Melbourne community school with innovative educational practices.

1975: The Inner City Tape (30 mins) Segments of a process video compiled as a visual presentation to the Human Relations Commission set-up under the Whitlam Federal Labor government.

1974: Fig St. Fiasco (40 mins) A process video of the residents' lead campaign to stop a freeway cutting through and decimating the inner-Sydney residential areas of Glebe and Ultimo.

You Have To Live With It (23 mins) A process video of a residents' led campaign to close-down a container terminal in the Sydney suburb of Balmain.

Above: Tom Zubrycki

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