

## PREFACE

Why write about documentary? It is simply film about the real world; or it is film using shots of the real world. Its articulations are the same as those used for fiction, and it therefore does not differ in any significant way from fiction; or its articulations are so rudimentary as not to deserve serious scrutiny at all. It presents no interesting problems purely by virtue of being documentary; or such problems as it presents are practical and procedural rather than ideological or aesthetic. Is that not so?

Let me offer in reply an anecdote from my own experience as an editor. A film on which I worked included a female circumcision; and we had covered this, as I recall, with a succession of long-held shots of people waiting outside the hut where the operation was taking place. During the discussion after a rough-cut viewing, three divergent views of this sequence were expressed. One person suggested that, if we were not to see the surgery, we might at least be allowed to hear a scream or two to signal to the viewer the unpleasantness of what was occurring. Someone else

remarked that there had in fact been a scream recorded during this event, and that it would be perfectly legitimate for us to lay it over. But someone else again made the point that the scream had been such an exceptional feature of this ceremony that it would be a misrepresentation of the culture to include it. What is significant about these three views is that they reflect three distinct assumptions about the claim documentary stakes upon the world: in the first case, symbolic (a scream stands for pain); in the second, referential (this is what our equipment actually recorded); in the third, generalisatory (to include the atypical is misleading). This question, about the claim documentaries stake upon the world, is one that confronts us afresh, and in different ways, with every project. No simple answer can serve for all circumstances; and no film editor can avoid fretting about such things.

Since I have stressed the particularities of life in the cutting room, I ought perhaps to allow a brief glimpse into my own background. I cut my first film in 1963, just at the time when the first silent-running cameras and lightweight broadcast-quality tape recorders were becoming available in Britain. By mid-1965, the revolution was complete, and these had become standard equipment in British television. Indeed, the explosion of documentary into television at that time is often associated in people's minds specifically with this equipment, though it would be more true to say that it was consequent upon developments of a slower and less dramatic nature: the gradual improvement in the resolution of film emulsions to the point where 16mm became acceptable as a professional gauge for what was still, in Britain at that time, the old 405-line TV system. As an enthusiast for documentary before entering the industry, my loyalties lay with those traditions that had grown out of the use of 35mm: the work of

Joris Ivens, Georges Franju, Alain Resnais, or—more specifically, here at home—Humphrey Jennings. These were traditions reliant upon raising the everyday image to quasi-symbolic status through the use of juxtaposition, both of image with image and of image with sound, to create a rich web of connotation and nuance.

As it happens, I still have great affection for that sort of filmmaking. It shares with later *vérité* and observational methods one crucial characteristic, namely, an insistence on the priority of the given: an insistence that meaning should be generated directly from the organisation of the visual and auditory material, rather than this material being subordinated to something prior or extrinsic—typically, a pre-scripted schema or a dominant verbal narration. Perhaps because we had the weight of three decades of British Documentary behind us, television in this country was slow to take up the challenge of the groundbreaking *vérité* work being produced in America. One of the first series to do so was Roger Graef's *Space between Words*, five films devoted to the theme of human communication. It was around the same time that the need was being felt to raise films about other cultures above the banal level of the travelogue. In 1969 or 1970, Brian Moser persuaded Granada Television to initiate the *Disappearing World* series, one of whose defining characteristics was that each programme should be made in collaboration with an anthropologist expert in the particular field and, indeed, on close personal terms with the particular people being filmed. Methods akin to those pioneered by such filmmakers as Jean Rouch and the MacDougalls were adapted, albeit hesitantly, in this rapidly developing and critically successful genre.

Having been fortunate enough to be in the right place at the

right time for *Space between Words*, I gravitated more and more toward anthropological film—which was where all the interesting arguments were then happening—and for some years worked primarily in this and closely related areas. To a significant extent, the essays in this collection map that trajectory and the preoccupations which accompanied it.

It has always seemed to me axiomatic that film works not with a learned and shared symbolic vocabulary but with images whose associations will vary somewhat from viewer to viewer. Thus the meaning attributed to any text—and to documentary in particular—must entrain, and therefore by the same token modify in some degree, the viewer's own experience. This being the case, even the most seemingly innocent response can be the product of complex negotiations between the viewer and the ordering of the imagery.

Hence some of these essays offer analyses of particular films from a viewer's perspective, while others adopt the perspective of the filmmaker in discussing the options available in a working context. There ought surely to be some way for these two perspectives to be reconciled; but it is often far from obvious how this could be done. It was to some extent a recognition of such difficulties which led me, at a certain point, to become dissatisfied with the rigidity of the terms in which I was writing about film, and to ask whether the subject might not be better served by something more allusive, tangential, open even to the risk of self-contradiction.

An outcome of such self-questioning was "Notes on the Ascent of a Fictitious Mountain," a piece which engages with another major preoccupation: the relation of documentary to fiction. Postmodernism has lent new currency to the weary old

argument that, since fiction is narrative, anything which partakes of narrative must be fiction. This glib formulation, which deletes at one stroke our project as documentary filmmakers and theorises our life's work out of existence, has met little opposition from within the critical and scholarly orthodoxies of the past two decades. It has at times seemed important, therefore, to pay attention to the workings of fiction film, especially where, as with *Salvatore Giuliano*, this assumes a certain documentary flavour. There was a time, after all, in the early 1930s, when the terms "documentary" and "realist film" were treated as virtually synonymous.

But to return to the workbench, to television. Since this is where most documentary is now produced and disseminated, we are bound to ask what is the function of this institution in our society. Following the restoration of the British monarchy in 1659, demands were voiced for the curtailment of public literacy in the hope that outbreaks of political thinking on the part of the lower orders might be avoided in the future (and indeed, it was not until after the First World War that the level of general education, as measured by the proportion of the population entering university, recovered to that of the 1640s). At the beginning of the nineteenth century it was argued by leading figures in the Methodist church that, while it was acceptable for their Sunday schools to teach the children of the poor to read—so that they might peruse the Scriptures—teaching them to write was an altogether more hazardous undertaking. In 1957 Richard Hoggart published his seminal book, *The Uses of Literacy*, which analysed the way in which the near-universal adult literacy resulting from the Education Acts of the 1870s and 1880s had been hijacked and trivialised by the purveyors of "popular" culture, in particular the

tabloid press. It may be argued that the institution of television should be looked at against this background. Just as, in the late nineteenth century, industry had reached a point where it could no longer make do with an illiterate workforce, so, from the mid-twentieth century onward, advances in technology demanded workers of ever-increasing intellectual sophistication. The problem was how to achieve such sophistication without sacrificing political docility. Imagine someone conforming to this requirement, and you will have lit upon the stereotypical viewer as defined by today's television: credited with broad interests, but not assumed to act on them; encouraged to think, but only within the parameters allowed by the programme formats—an intelligence self-locked into passivity.

Ideological determinism is seldom the whole story—or seldom a simple one. I mention these things only to make the obvious point that all debate about filmmaking takes place within profound institutional constraints, even where these are so familiar that we scarcely identify them as such. In this country we have been relatively lucky, especially in the five or six years after the launch of Channel 4 in 1982. These years were the high-water mark of British television, when BBC2 also, for whatever reasons, raised its standards and commissioned such remarkable work as the second tranche of documentaries about the Maasai by Melissa Llewelyn-Davies. The phrase commonly used—and which I catch myself trying to avoid—is “quality programming.” “Quality” is what legislation in these areas typically pledges itself to preserve; but it is an unhelpful concept, since it presupposes someone competent who may be deputed to judge it. What really matters is that programmes should address the viewer in such a way that the viewer may approach them on his or her own terms

and not on those of television management. And for a while we came close to seeing these criteria fulfilled.

Some may feel that I have given too much time to television. But its merit was that it allowed a diversity of people—playwrights, physicists, coal miners, comedians, filmmakers—to come together before a public which, if never homogeneous, was a good deal less fissile than it appears today. Top executives continue shuffling the syllables—docu-soap, info-tainment, fact-ion—in the hope of stumbling upon something that will look good in their corporate mission statements; but secretly they know the game is up. And it is possible that the game is up not only because they chose to concede it, and not only because of the proliferation of electronic gizmos inside and outside of television, but because of structural changes in postindustrial Western society whereby the former working population (the working and middle classes) have been reduced to the status once imposed upon colonial peoples: that of a reservoir of labour which may be drawn upon when required but to whom no societal responsibilities are acknowledged.

To sum up: for much of the span of my own working life, it has been possible for documentarists in Britain to believe in—or to be seduced by, if you prefer—the ideal of television as a means of disseminating significant work to a mass audience; and it was out of this milieu, this set of assumptions, this particular concatenation of people and circumstances, that the essays in this volume grew. I hope, however, that this does not limit their usefulness, and that the questions they raise may be granted a significance beyond the parochial.

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