

GENRE STUDIES: DOCUMENTARY IN NEW ZEALAND: PART TWO. THE TELEVISION AGE

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In the second half of the twentieth century television has been the single most important formative influence in determining the types of documentary that are produced and the forms in which they appear. In the twenty first century, digital production and delivery will be the next most important influence.

DOCUMENTARY IN THE 60s & 70s

Early television documentary in New Zealand tended to default to the Expository mode (modes are basic ways of organising texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions) and was often subsumed into news and current affairs as extended reportage. The National Film Unit continued with Pictorial Parades, and ironically, now that the political attention was on television, was able to make more innovative work. They also produced material for television. Internationally, the Observational (cinema verite / direct cinema) and Interactive / Participatory documentary modes were providing more compelling viewing. The NZBC commissioned work from independent production houses such as Pacific Films to make content imbued with this ethos. New topics were tackled, and the old ones shown in a new light.

COMPASS: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF TELEVISION

Compass: The First Five Years of Television (extracts)

New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation 1965. Duration 10:12

Compass was the first documentary series to screen on New Zealand television, commencing in 1964. Making a programme on itself, on the first five years of television in New Zealand, proved challenging for an organisation steeped in the belief in the educational properties of the expository mode. This conflict was resolved in the introduction: "It was obviously out of the question for the NZBC to look inwards upon itself with an acceptable degree of objectivity, so we went outside the corporation". The frontperson also reveals resignation to the changed realities of documentary, when voice-of-God authority is no longer that, when he says: "...we don't see this as a definitive statement on television in New Zealand, but we do hope it will entertain, inform. and serve the purposes for which it was intended".

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THE TALL TREES AND THE GOLD

The Tall Trees and the Gold (extract)

New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation 1966. Duration 3:57

The Tall Trees and the Gold is another expository work, and opens with what must have been the most elaborate piece-to-camera ever attempted in New Zealand. Zooming in from an Extreme Long Shot, to a Long Shot, before cutting to a Mid, an MCU, finally zooming out and panning right. All this takes place on a rock in the middle of a stream, certainly testing for location sound. A female narrator is also a big change, although her accent is still very proper.

THE CHALLENGERS

Pictorial Parade 179 (extract)

National Film Unit 1966. Duration 1:32

The Film Unit has a bit of fun with this one, referencing the television medium that is challenging it. Emma Peel of 'The Avengers' has started a new wave of interest amongst women in judo. The film has no narration and only music as a soundtrack and mixes drama with a real judo class at the YMCA. It follows an Emma Peel type character, from her Jaguar car, to her judo lesson where she flips the male instructor, as well as the camera, and we view her leaving through an upside down frame. This is an exercise in show, not tell, that many of the Pictorial Parades will excel at over the next few years.

WOOL GATHERING

Pictorial Parade 182 \ (extract)

National Film Unit 1966. Duration 4:52

The description of its content doesn't do it justice: as a survey of the production of wool in New Zealand; from the shearing shed, to wool stores where it is graded, to the auction and finally for export. Again, it is show not tell, and is a masterful use of film narrative conventions of soundtrack, mise-en-scene and editing. This is truly, the creative treatment of actuality. I wonder what the wool board thought?

WELLINGTON IN THE 60s - THE WAY IT SEEMED

Wellington in the 60s – The Way it Seemed (extracts)

Pacific Films [196-]. Duration 5:25

A ponderous existential city film about several Wellingtonians, including James K. Baxter, and their thoughts about the town. Essentially an Observational mode Genre Studies: Documentary in New Zealand. Part Two: The Television

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documentary made possible by smaller, lighter cameras and faster film stock. However, it departs from 'pure' Direct Cinema because it does not use synchronised sound. Images of the city are intercut with images of the subjects or, 'social actors', going about their lives accompanied by their voice-overs and occasional music.

SURVEY: GETTING TOGETHER

Survey: Getting Together (extract)

Pacific Films / NZBC 1971. Duration 7:14

A documentary produced for the NZBC television series Survey that screened in prime time on New Zealand's only television channel. Survey supported innovative work such as; an exploration of school children's imagination and understanding of the concept of freedom; an examination of the passions of a musician, astronomer and sports writer; and this extract, looking at the weird and wonderful community groups formed by New Zealanders. After an introduction by Denis Glover (who wrote the poem for the 1940s film *The Coaster*) the film sets about showing examples of social groups from schools to gentleman's clubs. After decades of being told what to think by an authoritative narrator, these documentaries omitted authoritative commentary and gave voices to their subjects. The opening montage is a sophisticated use of fast motion, music, archival footage and interview (without titles). Narrative control, instead, came in the editing process.

THE STREET

The Street (extracts)

National Film Unit 1977. Duration 6:45

This is an example of the Interactive / Participatory mode of documentary where the encounter between the filmmaker and subject is recorded. *The Street* is about the lives of a group of families living in what was then a new subdivision in Meadowbank in Auckland. The opening of the documentary is the screening party for the participants. The director discusses on camera why he is filming, explaining that he doesn't want the film to record his point of view, and that they had a chance to view it, and say whether they thought it was fair before the film ever goes on TV. Such was the idealism and search for veracity in documentary at the time, although the process of mediation does play havoc with that.

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POLITICAL

Evolutionary shifts in documentary method and technology ran parallel with cultural shifts. The sixties, seventies and eighties saw new content reflecting these changes.

TANGATA WHENUA: THE CARVING CRIES

Tangata Whenua: The Carving Cries (extract)

Pacific Films 1974. Duration 1:19

An extract from the groundbreaking television series that, for the first time, presented a Maori perspective on Maori. Made by Pacific Films for the NZBC, presented by Michael King, and directed by Barry Barclay. Barclay brought not only a Maori perspective, but a Maori approach to filmmaking on this Expository documentary. He spent much more time on pre-production, establishing relationships with his subjects (social actors). Technically, he often shot with a long lens to allow his subjects space from the camera.

BASTION POINT: DAY 507

Bastion Point: Day 507 (extracts)

Awatea Films 1980. Duration 10:44

This Observational mode film documents the occupation of Bastion Point in the struggle for Maori land rights. The protest began in 1977 when the government proposed to subdivide Maori land in the centre of Auckland city. Ngati Whatua people occupied the land, built living areas, and planted crops. The film concentrates on the 507th day of occupation when the protesters were forcibly removed. This was the only film crew permitted in the occupied area.

Merata Mita writes: "This film is the total opposite of how a television documentary is made. It has a partisan viewpoint, is short on commentary, and emphasises the overkill aspect of the combined police/military operation. It is a style of documentary that I have never deviated from because it best expresses a Maori approach to film making."

PATU!

Patu! (extracts)

Awatea Films 1983. Duration 9:44

"The most controversial, and the most contested, event in recent New Zealand history was the 1981 South African rugby tour. Half the country was opposed to

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the tour, the establishment was determined the tour would go ahead, and the result was a country divided against itself almost to the point of civil war. This incredible documentary shows what happened. The actual filming was both dangerous and difficult and attempts to have the negative confiscated...[Merata Mita's] achievement is as impressive technically as it is effective emotionally. A major documentary of our time." – London Film Festival.

"Many people gave their time, money and equipment to see Patu! completed, and it could never have been done otherwise. I was asked repeatedly if I thought I was the right person to make the film, or why I was making it. The reason I was asked the question was that some people told me they feared that the film would not be accurate because it would have a Maori perspective! The Pākehā bias in all things recorded in Aotearoa was never questioned. The other reason they gave was that my politics extended no further than the Maori and the marae, and was I sure I understood the international ramifications of the tour. Yes, Patu! has a Maori perspective but it does not override the mass mobilisation of New Zealand's white middle class, neither does it take credit from those who rightly deserve it, everyone who put themselves on the line. My perspective encourages people to look at themselves and examine the ground they stand on, while fighting racial injustice thousands of miles across the sea." – Merata Mita.

Merata Mita continues to use essentially the Observational mode in this feature format. Long takes, lack of commentary, diegetic sound and hand-held cameras capture what it was actually like, and make the film seem less mediated. There are, however, some expositional features such as interviews and titles to give structure to a film that was shot over many months throughout the country. There were many different crew shooting this, but it was under Mita's skilful editing that this film came together so powerfully. Like Bastion Point, context is set in the beginning with a commentary voice-over, but this time, a montage of stills juxtapose Black oppression in South Africa with images of All Blacks, accompanied by a soundtrack of God Defend New Zealand and protest chants.

CAMPAIGN

Campaign (extracts)

Unreal Film 1999. Duration 3:53

In 1960 Observational documentary pioneer, Richard Leacock, made Primary, a film about the American elections of that year, and showed an intimate, unseen side of the political process. In 1996, Tony Sutorious made an Interactive / Participatory documentary on the events of the general election in the Wellington Central seat, the first year of MMP. Sutorious has minimal crew and operates the camera and interacts with his subjects causing them to look directly at the camera. The National candidate, Mark Thomas actually answers Sutorious by calling him Tony. This level of intimacy contrasts with the Observational footage of the candidates in the public, political arena.

MURDER THEY SAID

Murder they Said (extract)

Bryan Bruce Productions 1996. Duration 5:39

Murder they Said has been influenced by the reflexive and performative styles of documentary making that grew out of the 1980s. Reflexive documentary reflects on the production process involved in telling a story. Performative documentary uses performance to challenge the mode between fact and fiction. These styles again attempt to draw the viewers attention to the documentary making process and the choices a filmmaker makes that alter the delivery of the truth. Thin Blue Line by Errol Morris is the classic example; in both its content and style it examines the notion of truth by playing tricks on the viewer and questioning our perception.

Murder They Said examines the notion of truth by showing the different perspectives involved in the murder of the two Swedish Backpackers Heidi Paakkonen and Urban Hoglin in 1989. At times we are convinced of David Tamihere's guilt, and then we question our earlier conviction.

PERSONAL

Cost was a huge gatekeeper when it came to the kind of stories that were told. Funding body support from the likes of the Arts Council and Creative New Zealand, and the advent of cheaper video technology, allowed for diverse and intimate expressions in documentary making.

IRENE - 59

Irene – 59 (extract)

Shereen Maloney 1983. Duration 6:42

The feminist phrase ‘the personal is political’ is especially true in regard to documentary.

Irene–59, is a portrait study of the director’s mother. Irene talks about growing older and says that she feels just as wide– eyed and interested in things now as she did when she was 20. She talks about her first job and the wonderful feeling of independence it brought her.

“I wanted to make a film for women like my mother, housewives in the suburbs, who are puzzled and threatened by feminism. It presents an ‘ordinary woman’ whose growing self awareness has paralleled a growing political awareness, a sense of herself in relation to the people around her and the broader issues facing women today” – Shereen Maloney

BEHAVIOURS OF THE BACKPACKER

Behaviours of the Backpacker (extracts)

Sandor Lau 2004. Duration 7:30

Sandor Lau walks on a journey of discovery from Auckland to Cape Reinga. As a one person crew he interacts with his subjects and ingeniously, manages a tracking shot of himself, as well as static camera positions as he walked by. Lau shares autobiographical details and expounds his views and interviews others for theirs. This coupled with a ‘handycam’ look of a home video makes the story very personal, but belies the fact that it is tightly edited and well made.

[**NOTE: Teachers can purchase Sandor’s documentaries including Behaviours of the Backpacker on www.sandorlau.net]

PANSY

Pansy (extracts)

M.F. Films 2001. Duration 12:10

“Using a personal voice and poetic style of film-making, writer/director Peter Wells looks at his life through pansy-tinted glasses as he makes the journey back to his childhood in the poignant autobiographical documentary Pansy. Charting the voyage of a man who later became an outspoken New Zealand gay artist, it looks back at the complications of his past and a period of time when it was compulsory to be straight. He also recalls the loss of his only sibling, brother Russell, to HIV Aids in 1989. A mixture of documentary, home movie, poetry and contemplation, pansy almost hits all of the documentary modes:

Poetic – transforming historical material into a more abstract, lyrical form.

Expository – the use of interviews

Interactive – the encounter between filmmaker and subject is recorded

Reflexive – engages actively with issues of realism and representation

Performative – autobiographical and acknowledges the emotional and subjective aspects of documentary

GEORGIE GIRL

Georgie Girl (extract)

Occasional Productions 2002. Duration 5:04

This is a contemporary New Zealand example of an expository style. Through interviews, archival footage, and voiceovers Georgie Girl shows the life of Georgina Beyer who spent her early years as a prostitute and stripper on the streets of Wellington, and became the world’s first transsexual Member of Parliament. Annie Goldson directs

[**NOTE: Teachers can purchase Annie Goldson’s documentaries including Georgie Girl on www.op.co.nz]

THE LIVING ROOM

The Living Room (extract)

Sticky Pictures 2005. Duration 4:12

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A documentary about artists meant that the producers of The Living Room were able to unleash a battery of techniques of form to match the content: dramatisations, flash frames, unusual composition and use of colour, slow/fast motion, time lapse, slow pans past the subjects as they speak, looking directly at the camera either in sync or with a voice-over. Music also features heavily, adding a music video feel. Short and intense, this profile is one of several in a half hour show that leaves little time for contemplation. The Living Room certainly pushes boundaries and it is worth noting that even the most mainstream documentary now include many of these techniques.

PERSONALITY

Mainstream television is now the domain of the personality, either a famous person fronting a documentary, or a want-to-be famous someone putting themselves through a 'reality' format.

CELEBRITY TREASURE ISLAND : EPISODE ONE

Celebrity Treasure Island : Episode One (extract)

Touchdown Productions 2001. Duration 4:03

Reality television phenomena gets its name not for being true to everyday conditions but for the fact that it uses 'real' people, albeit in contrived and exceptional situations, and focuses on their personalities and individual dramas.

New Zealand's Touchdown Pictures developed the concept for Celebrity Treasure Island where minor celebrities are sent to survive and compete against each other on a remote island. Touchdown owns the shows copyright and have sold the concept internationally. Another New Zealand contribution to reality TV was the 1999 show, Popstars, about the manufacture of the 'girl band' True Bliss. The show was a moderate success in New Zealand and had a freshness and local identity about it. However, the rights were sold overseas, and the show was packaged and homogenized for international consumption in a global market hungry for product to attract audiences for advertisers.

WHO ATE ALL THE PIES

Who Ate All the Pies (extract)

Gibson Group 2002. Duration 5:06

Personality documentaries necessitate the Interactive / Participatory mode and immediately give the audience someone to identify with and feel they know, to take them on a journey of discovery. Generally light hearted in nature, and therefore, not controversial, just entertaining.

DRAMA–DOCUMENTARY

Throughout cinema history, both fiction, and non-fiction storytelling, relied on the audience believing in what they were watching, either through the suspension of disbelief, or the belief that what they were watching was in fact real. To achieve this, fiction and non-fiction used each others conventions when it suited. For fiction, it was the use of an Observational documentary look, to make a film seem more real, and for documentary, it was the dramatic narrative structure of actuality and use of dramatizations.

GONE UP NORTH FOR A WHILE

Gone Up North for a While (extracts)

National Film Unit 1972. Duration 5:18

‘Gone up north for a while’ is a euphemism for disappearing to have an illegitimate child. This is a gritty piece of social realist drama not averse to facts and figures with a graphic at the start that says: “Last year there were eight and a half thousand illegitimate births in New Zealand”. Some of the handheld camerawork is indebted to Observational documentary, chosen for its heightened realism. The last scene of the film actually switches to a documentary style when the fictional protagonist is interviewed as she walks down the hospital corridor. Keep an eye out for the hunk – Paul Holmes.

THE GOVERNOR: THE REVEREND TRAITOR

The Governor: The Reverend Traitor (extract)

National Film Unit 1977. Duration 5:21

The six part series, The Governor, won the 1978 Feltex Award for Best Drama. Based on the life and times of Sir George Grey, creative license is employed to make an entertaining version of the past. The treaty signing scene is particularly important, and surely has the potential to be the most truthful representation because of the documentation of the event, although, we can be sure, dramatic considerations came first. It’s worth comparing this dramatization of the treaty signing with the version in One Hundred Crowded years from Documentary in New Zealand Part One.

THE FEATHERS OF PEACE

The Feathers of Peace (extract)

He Taonga Films 2000. Duration 10:33

The Feathers of Peace is the kind of rich, provocative and uncompromising film about New Zealand history we should be seeing and almost never do. The film charts the history of the Moriori people in the Chatham Islands, as recounted in Michael King's book *Moriori...* It's a great story – and great revisionist history. As Barclay himself is quick to point out, this is not the prevailing understanding of the situation. "I knew nothing about Moriori and what I did know was wrong", he says. "The typical New Zealand idea is that they were a vanished people and they'd been overrun by more energetic Maori invasions or settlements." But King's book is several years old now – apart from anything, it took 7 years to get the film funded, through a combination of NZ on Air and Film Commission funding – and the film takes the historical documentation within the book, and uses it as the basis for a very striking use of an unusual documentary approach – almost the entirety of the film is told through dramatised reconstruction, and fictionalised interviews with actors playing the roles of historical figures. It's an approach which raises a lot of questions of its own – for instance about the way modern news techniques are accepted unambivalently as 'documentary' by audiences – but its also one that presents the varied and complex perspectives in an understandable and vivid way. "I wanted to know, how do people react in these situations?", Barclay told me. "You couldn't sit on the fence, people are under enormous stress... These people are 100, 200 years in the past but they could still be people on the street. These human qualities intrigued me." This film is very good at articulating these human qualities... it doesn't shy away from expressing the way that everybody has their reasons, and that some of them are harder to understand than others."

MOCKUMENTARY

As the documentary Genre evolves, hybrids and sub-genres proliferate, blurring boundaries between fact and fiction further. Mockumentary is one such example that parodies the genre itself.

COUNTRY CALENDAR

Country Calendar (extract)

Television New Zealand 1980. Duration 5:29

Country Calendar is an Expository / Interactive documentary on farming life that has been around almost as long as New Zealand TV. Every now and then it uses its status to put forward a parody in the form of a mockumentary, just in case people were taking it too seriously. The rural sector is not without a sense of humour, although, it does indeed harbour many eccentrics, so a story such as this; a farmer who plays his fence may be believable. Done with a straight face, using the conventions of documentary, it may be true!

FORGOTTEN SILVER

Forgotten Silver (extract)

Wingnut Films 1995. Duration 4:08

The mockumentary is a sub-genre that exploits the narrative conventions of the documentary for comic effect. When 'Forgotten Silver' screened in New Zealand many people were convinced that its subject New Zealander Colin McKenzie truly existed. Even though the content was ridiculous and claimed for example that McKenzie made the first feature length 'talkie' (accidentally in Chinese) and built an entire city by himself in the West Coast bush to film a biblical epic 'Salome' which was funded by the Communists and had to have all references to the bible taken out of it, people had come to trust a style they saw as telling the truth, and were convinced of its legitimacy.

STUDENT DOCUMENTARY

Desktop editing, cheaper digital cameras and teachers willing to use this powerful tool in classrooms, has brought about student made documentary. Documentary production not only teaches young people about the subject of their films, but also, about the whole mediation process where they have to present an aspect of the world, in order to inform, educate and/or entertain.

The three films presented here are all finalists in the Royal Society of New Zealand's Big Science Adventures. All three tackle difficult topics and effectively use the codes and conventions of the genre to make the subject accessible to their audience.

THE LIFE AND DISCOVERIES OF MAURICE WILKINS

The Life and Discoveries of Maurice
Wilkins

Fairfield College 2005.

Duration 5:06

NEWTONIAN CHICKS GREATEST HITS

Newtonian Chicks Greatest
Hits

Kaitaia College 2005.

Duration 5:09

MERE NIGHT

Mere Night

Wellington High School 2006. Duration
4:58