

# DOCUMENTARY AND ARCHIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Documentaries and archive materials are not just from and about the ancient past. We are creating and participating in documentaries and archives all the time and perhaps never more so than in the digital age with the pervasive nature of sound and image recording and playback devices. How are we to make sense of this world and navigate this sea of information? This workshop considered what critical skills teachers and learners might need to deploy in negotiating these assets and applying them to make successful documentaries. In considering these questions, delegates researched, planned and created a short documentary, exploring how editing, sound and image can affect textual meaning through an exercise using a range of archive film, music and sound effects in a simple editing interface.*

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This workshop was informed by the central tenets of the conference – continuities from the critical and creative towards the cultural and the notion that in order to produce engaging practical work and become skilled creative producers, we need to identify, develop and deploy a range of critical and selection skills. This notion of selection and developing skills for interrogating materials has become especially significant in the context of the pervasiveness of digital technology and easy availability of so much multimedia material.

From a curriculum-centred perspective, requirements to work on persuasive and non-fiction texts and literacy objectives made this workshop relevant to all delegates. The objective of the workshop was for delegates to feel confident in approaching archive and documentary materials and projects with a broad range of critical skills, applying these in order to make successful documentaries. The first part of the workshop explored definitions and theory and looked at documentary from a historical perspective including the genre today. In the second part of the workshop, delegates applied these critical skills to a range of historical sources to produce short documentaries to a specific brief.

## ARCHIVE AND DOCUMENTARY TODAY

Only a few years ago, it seemed that more traditional forms of documentary were being marginalised, disappearing from the prime time television schedules with the rise of reality television and the popular factual sub-genres. They had been disappearing from cinema screens for years, with the ‘supporting film’ to the main feature ending in the 1970s and challenges of gaining theatrical exhibition space subsequent to that. Until recently, the problem was access – how could you actually get to see great examples of the genre?

However, in recent years the genre has been reinvigorated, with box-office success for award-winning documentary features such as *Man on Wire* (Marsh, 2008), *Iraq in Fragments* (Longley, 2006) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) and prime time television exposure for award-winning documentaries such as *The Lie of the Land* (Dineen, 2007). DVD reissues of classics such as *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922) made the previously inaccessible accessible. However, it is the advent of the Internet and Web2.0 in particular that has had a massive impact on the type and availability of archive and documentary. For example, YouTube contains clips from most of the above-mentioned films. However, a large part of YouTube’s content is of ordinary people getting married, on a night out, playing with their children, going to school – self-made documentaries – which themselves raise interesting questions. Indeed, the situation now is almost the reverse of that of a few years ago – access is no longer the issue; it is selection. In order to navigate this sea of archive and documentary, we need to be able to select; and in order to do this, we need to be able to frame and ask critical questions.

## THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE

We ask students to make documentaries, but what do we mean by the term? Are mobile phone films of someone walking home from school and *Iraq in Fragments* both documentaries? What characteristics might they have in common? In looking at much of the self-made material on YouTube, for example, what is striking is how in some ways, this style of media production, with its single, unedited shot taken on the latest mobile device goes back to the early days of filmmaking. Films by the Lumière Brothers for example, show workers leaving their factory at the end of a shift (*La sortie des Usines Lumière a Lyon*, 1895) or a train arriving in a station (*L’Arrivée d’un Train à la Ciotat*, 1896). These films are single shots, their production style determined by the novelty of showing an event,

limited by the technology in terms of duration of camera stock and cumbersomeness of the cameras. This notion of the filmmaker showing rather than telling has parallels on YouTube – the single shot of the train arriving at the station – it's almost as if we've come full circle and gone back to the beginnings of film... These films might therefore more properly be called actualities rather than documentaries. We may all have access to media production technology now, but we perhaps ought to become more selective in terms of what and how we shoot and assemble material so that we can engage an audience and create meaningful work.

But to get back to the theory... Most film theory books state that the documentary genre requires that:

- events in the films should be authentic and unstaged
- that the world depicted is real and not imaginary
- that the filmmaker is simply observing and recording events

For a film to be able to fulfil these criteria, we need to ask a series of critical questions and to question this definition itself – the most obvious questions might be; how can we as the audience know that an event is authentic or that this world is real? How can a filmmaker observe events without themselves affecting the results or being a participant?

The term 'documentary' was not actually coined until 1926 by John Grierson, in his review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*, which showed a reconstruction of traditional cultural life on a Samoan island, Grierson saying that it had 'documentary value'. Grierson's further definition of documentary as 'the *creative* interpretation of actuality' (my italics) is useful here, leading us to consider what sort of effective critical strategies might be essential in approaching the genre in the same way that we would approach a feature film – the notion that documentaries are constructed, authored, mediated texts.

### SELECTION AND CONSTRUCTION

All photographs, adverts, paintings and films have been thought out by someone - you, the professionals, advertisers, painters etc. Someone has considered what to put in the picture / how to compose their picture / the distance at which to take the picture and so on. Films then are constructed - they don't just happen. As viewers, we don't usually know about the decisions that are made during the creation of a film or a sequence in it, but we can usually decipher why a picture looks as it does. Without being conscious of what we are doing, we automatically 'read' films and images, making sense of them and their messages.

So, what sort of questions do we need to ask of a film in order to understand how and why it was constructed? What sort of things are we looking for and how do they affect the meaning of the film? Areas to consider include:

- Production - Why was the film made - intention
- Technological considerations
- Point of view
- Selection of archive
- Editing
- Music
- Commentary
- Sound effects
- What is shown
- What isn't shown
- Audience – appeal and expectations
- Faking and 'Improvers'

To illustrate the notion of the constructed text, delegates watched a German newsreel covering the D-Day landings in 1944 and discussed how the stirring voiceover, sound effects and music, well-composed and lit stock shots and fast-paced editing gave the exciting impression that all was going well in the war for Germany, which was far from reality.

It is perhaps even more important to apply these critical questions to material that we are familiar with; material that has arguably entered the fabric of our culture to occupy the contradictory positions of being both a metaphor for the poignancy of sacrifice whilst also being a 'truthful' representation of the past. A good example of this is an 'over the top' sequence from the feature film *The Battle of the Somme* (1916). The sequence features a small group of infantrymen lining up in a trench before an attack and going over the top on the command of their officer. It cuts to a shot behind the men as they advance across No Man's Land, many falling to the ground, wounded or killed. Delegates examined this sequence in detail, uncovering the clues that mark it out as an 'improver' on the truth – the position of the camera, the soldier's equipment and demeanour, for example. They then compared this sequence to actual record film of a trench attack, noting the differences between the two and the effect that each had in terms of audience engagement. This exercise illustrates the importance of being able to distinguish between reality and 'improved reality'; between record film and documentary. Unlike documentaries, record film is unedited. However, we still need to ask some critical questions of record film, asking about the position of the camera, mise en scène and institution questions about production for example.

This exercise demonstrates the importance of careful research, that the integrity (or otherwise) and provenance of archive film must be respected and that it should never be used in a 'generic' way, as 'wallpaper' – as bland and inaccurate illustration.

### THE TASK

The core activity of the workshop asked delegates to bring these critical skills to bear on producing a short documentary about the first day of the Battle of the Somme, requiring them to examine how sources can be interpreted in a number of different ways depending on your perspective as a filmmaker. Working in pairs, their films had to reflect a particular thesis; a patriotic film made shortly after the attack, a pacifist viewpoint or a modern-day filmmaker trying to show the strategic importance of 1 July 1916. As sources, delegates had a range of film, music and sound effects to work with plus background information to the event itself. The film was from two sources – the feature film *The Battle of the Somme*, shot on the Somme prior to, during and after the battle, and the present-day battlefields. A selection of music and sound effects evoked a range of moods. Delegates were encouraged to follow a structured approach to the Task as a route to the most successful outcome, requiring them to make decisions about how a range of media could be best selected and constructed to convey the mood and the message of their thesis.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Research is the key to successful documentaries and so the first task was to read the background information to formulate a 'story' about 1 July 1916 – which facts to leave in and what to leave out - and the mood and structure to best illustrate their thesis.

### MOVING IMAGES

Research is vital to a successful documentary and a filmmaker's thesis affects the initial selection and interpretation of material – an essential first step in any production. From looking through all the available film, delegates chose which images to include in what order – considering notions of editing style and selection, beginning to assemble their constructed text. Was it appropriate to use both modern-day and archive materials, for example?

### MUSIC AND SOUND EFFECTS

Sound is key to creating mood and satisfying audience expectation. However silence can also be a powerful part of a text. It is worth remembering that the film, *The Battle of the Somme* is actually silent and was originally shown with a piano accompaniment. Critical questions again – why might an audience 'need' to hear gunfire or explosions?

### SCRIPT

Constructed texts are persuasive texts, attempting to convince the audience of the validity of a certain argument or thesis. The script is therefore a crucial element in documentary, as either narration or captions. What information do you need to give your audience so that they understand what is happening? What sort of language should you use, which will effectively convey the mood that you wish to create? As a silent film, *The Battle of the Somme* uses captions to tell the story, whereas a present-day approach will be more likely to use narration.

### CONCLUSION

Towards the end of the workshop, delegates viewed and discussed the films, noting how despite drawing from the same pool of materials, a critical and selective, research-based approach had generated some diverse and effective outcomes in a short space of time.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES

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- 'Documentary in the Digital Age', Baker, M., Focal Press, 2006
- 'History and Motion – D-Day', Film Education, CD-ROM, 2004
- 'History and Motion – The Battle of the Somme', Film Education, CD-ROM, 2004
- 'Issues in Contemporary Documentary', Chapman, J., Polity Press, 2009
- 'The Battle of the Somme and The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks', McCarthy C., Dutton, P., Badsey, S. & Smither, R (ed.), Department of Film, Imperial War Museum and DD Video, 1993
- 'Rethinking Documentary: A Documentary Reader, Austin', T. & deJong, W., OUP, 2008

[www.filmeducation.org](http://www.filmeducation.org) has a range of documentary resources including 'The Documentary Genre' and resources on the following documentary films:

- The End of the Line* (2009), dir. Murray
- Sounds Like Teen Spirit* (2008), dir. Johnson
- A Crude Awakening* (2006), dir. Gelpke, McCormack, Caduff
- Bowling for Columbine* (2002), dir. Moore
- Etre et Avoir* (2002), dir. Philibert
- Hearts of Darkness* (1991), dir. Bahr & Hickenlooper
- The Road to Guantanamo* (2006), dir. Winterbottom
- Western Approaches* (1944), dir. Jackson

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*Jane Dickson is Director of Digital Media at Film Education, responsible for developing and producing many of the company's award-winning multimedia resources, often in collaboration with partner organisations. She has directed and produced television series for Channel Four and the BBC and also works as a trainer and workshop leader with particular reference to the moving image and media literacy. As a freelancer, Jane has worked on video projects with Ken Loach and for Carlton Television. Prior to this, she worked in the music industry. Jane's first degree was in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and she recently completed an MA in Digital Media course, producing a dissertation project on creativity and the Creative Industries in the socio-cultural, industrial and academic sectors. Her current interests include developing projects focused on digital literacies.*