



“Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

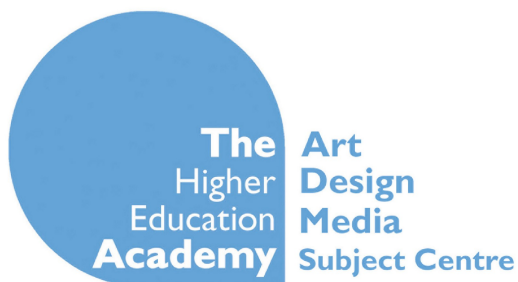
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Video Diary Making as a Research Method: Just Another Jargon of Authenticity?

(Summary of presentation given).

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From 2003-2006 I was an AHRC Fellow in the Creative and Performing Arts investigating autobiographical documentary and video diaries, a project which included including the production of the video-diary based film *A Whited Sepulchre*¹.

The presentation included sequences from the film, as a way, first of describing how the use of video diary making was itself a research method, and then of raising some of the questions - and the beginnings of answers - that the method provoked.

One of my aims with *A Whited Sepulchre* was - fairly obviously - to investigate the form/genre of the video diary by making one myself: filmmaking as a research method (or in Charlotte Crofts' words 'the use of practice as a research tool').

There were three main research contexts for the work of my Fellowship:

1) Intellectual/academic – documentary studies:

The context for my work is what John Corner calls the 'post-documentary' culture of television:

where the dynamics of diversion and the aesthetics of performance dominate a greatly expanded range of popular images of the real (Corner 2002: 257).

In this current phase of documentary culture performances of the self have come to the fore – from docu-soap to Reality TV, from Big Brother and Wife Swap. A key text for me in this research is Jon Dovey's *Freakshow* (2000), exploring what he termed 'first person media': the increasing focus on the personal and 'subjective' in 'post-documentary' culture: clearly a movement away from Nicholls' 'discourses of sobriety' (1991: 3). Biressi and Nunn's book *Reality TV* (2005) also calls attention to the rejection of documentary as 'rational investigation of historical or socio-cultural fact' (147)

¹ I have written about some the development and outcomes of this project in three articles (Dowmunt 2003, 2005 & 2007).

The book concludes:

To borrow an observation from Jon Dovey 'We are all learning to live in the freakshow , it is our new public space' (2000: 4). The question which should perhaps preoccupy us now is how we choose to navigate this space and make it our own (2005: 155).

A Whited Sepulchre, and my Fellowship as a whole, have been just such a navigation.

2) The autobiographical:

I am a documentary filmmaker with a background in the community-based and activist video work of the 1970s and 1980s. At that time our political and aesthetic opposition to conventional television documentary derived from a critique of its address – an address well described by Bill Nichols' phrase 'I speak about them to you', characterising the 'three way relationship' between filmmaker, subject and audience in documentary' (2001: 13). This, for us, indicated how the subjects of conventional documentary – 'them' – are necessarily subject to a reductive process of objectification – of 'othering'. I also want to modify Nichols' words to describe the Reithian tradition of television documentary I grew up with in the UK, which was more like 'WE speak about them to you..' - the WE being a kind of institutional version of the 'royal we', the divine right to speak in the polished patrician tones of the BBC, what, adapting Donna Haraway's phrase, we might call 'the voice of god-trick' (196). (Haraway contrasts the 'god-trick' – what she calls the 'view from above, from nowhere' (195). with a 'view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body'.)

In community video our aim was that people (particularly the socially excluded and misrepresented) should speak for and represent themselves, to express their/our own embodied perspectives, to counter the 'view from above' of mainstream broadcast television at the time. This view was also contested from within UK television by the 'access' work of the BBC's Community Programme Unit (CPU). In its early days the CPU collaborated mainly with groups to enable them to make programmes: so in their work the address was 'WE speak to you about US'.

This rejection of the 'sober discourses' of Reithian documentary in favour of empowering the 'embodied subjects' of documentary themselves is partially reflected in the development of some of

'post-documentary' forms which display an 'erosion of the distinctions between the public and the private sphere' (Biressi and Nunn 2005: 2). The (often very personal and confessional) performance of subjectivity has become an increasingly common feature in television documentary. However, it has to be said that these performances are more often structured and manipulated by television professionals, than they are the expression of empowered subjects.

The CPU changed to working more with individuals in the early 1990s with the arrival of small, easy to use camcorders (see Dovey 1993). The CPU developed the Video Diary form and then the Video Nation series, in which for the first time people from outside television were able to use cameras for themselves, doing their own filming, changing the address again from 'WE speak to you about us' to 'I speak about myself to you', and in the process creating a body of personal, autobiographical films for broadcast. Although there had been a small amount of autobiographical and diary filmmaking within the avant-garde before then, the arrival of the camcorder enabled an explosion of a new kind of work in which the video camera became an analogous tool to the pen or computer of the diarist or 'life-writer'.

As someone interested for my whole working life in the forms and generic inventions that alternative/community media developed, I became increasingly interested in the video diary mode, and in experimenting with it myself in a very personal way: indulging my self.

3) Intellectual/academic – the problem of the self and authorship:

Of course I quickly came up against contemporary debates about the unified/fragmented self, and in particular the critique of the white, male, middle-class historical origins and dominance of autobiography as a (written) form: clearly I needed to be wary of an unthinking acceptance of authoring my video diary from a coherent, singular, unproblematised 'self' (particularly as I fit in to all three of the above categories).

I'm encouraged in this ('self'- indulgent) exploration of my authorship by Liz Stanley's scepticism about white male theorists who celebrate the death of the author: as she says this is

A very convenient death – for them. At the very point when – due to the activities of anti-colonialism, the black movement, the women's movement, the gay movement – 'the author', the authoritative source of all that excludes, is named and has an

accusatory finger pointed at him, the author at this point conveniently dies .. (1992: 17).

Another ‘convenient death’ was the absenting (himself) of the filmmaker in direct cinema (in his effort to avoid the Reithian expositional I/we) as Michael Renov explains:

During the direct cinema period self-reference was shunned. But far from a sign of self-effacement, this was the symptomatic silence of the empowered who sought no forum for self-justification or display. And why should they need one? These white male professionals had assumed the mantle of filmic representation with the ease and self-assurance of a birthright. (2004: 181).

Eventually this central tenet of direct/observational cinema - the illusion of objectivity, transparency, ‘being there’ that the absent filmmaker allowed - was discredited, and the presence of the author/director in their own films has become much more common. Paul Arthur (1993) claims that Broomfield, Moore, Spurlock – are the only kind of filmmakers whose truth claims we will be inclined to believe in our sceptical, post-modern times. Nowadays, as Arthur goes on to say:

...it is required that filmmakers peel away the off-screen cloak of anonymity and, emerging into the light, make light of their power and dominion .. But a willingness to actually take apart and examine the conventions by which authority is inscribed – as opposed to making sport of them – is largely absent. (1993: 128).

In the remainder of the presentation I asked how the video diary genre might address these various concerns, using my work as an example.

Video diary making evolved its own specific generic qualities as it developed through the 1990s. Perhaps the most visible of these – and the one I focused on here– is the ‘to-camera piece’ in which the video diarist turns the camera on her- or himself and records her/his thoughts. It provides a close, filmic analogy to the written diary:

The visual form ... borrows from the literary model the tone, the revelation of intimate detail, and its use as a site for recording traumatic or at least serious confessions.’ (Reid 1999).

And Dovey describes how:

Aiming the camera at yourself, using your own body to record your own body, you the diarist, whisper in to the lens. It is the visual equivalent of the actor working downstage in soliloquy to the audience .. (the viewer is) being brought much closer, intimately closer, to the diarist and his or her particular subjective experience (2000: 73).

– a marked contrast to the ‘god-trick’ view from above.

A Whited Sepulchre draws on the stories of two journeys: my great-grandfather’s account in his diaries of his military posting to Sierra Leone in the 1880s, and my own video diary of a trip that I am made in December/January 2004-5, following in his footsteps but seeking a different understanding of Africa and of myself as a white Englishman. I recorded to-camera pieces every night.

The conclusion of my presentation was a 10 minute clip from *A Whited Sepulchre*, contrasting my video diary entries about my fears concerning a trip I was about to make

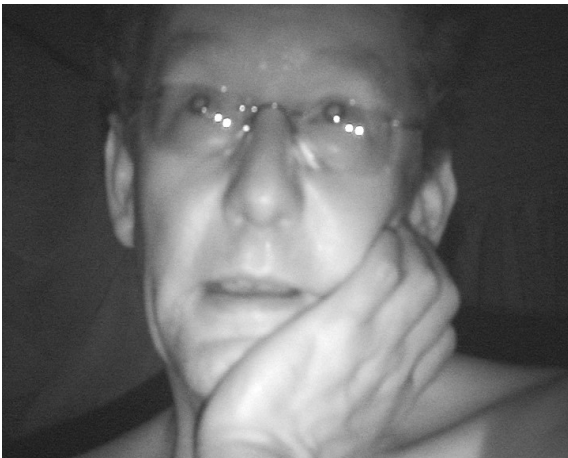


Fig. 1: Me, recording the diary entry about Robari

Fig. 2: My great-grandfather

‘into the bush’, with my great-grandfather’s rather more gung-ho written diary entries about his trip:

In the bush, 60 miles from a white man and probably shall not see a white face again til the relief comes up .. I embarked last Saturday evening .. after having dined at mess for the last time before plunging into outer barbarism and bidden farewell to civilisation for some few months. (Slessor 1998: 68).

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