INTRODUCTION

With the Australian independent one-hour social documentary relegated to late night viewing on ABC TV and replaced in prime time by ‘factual entertainment’ series and docusoaps, we are starting to see the results of the growing primacy in factual TV around the world of the imperative to entertain. In light of this trend, one might ask what kind of future there is at our major public broadcaster for locally produced documentaries which explore serious subjects in depth and concern themselves with critical reflection and social change.

Independent documentary-makers have already had to deal with reductions in funding. Now, as new hybrid genres multiply across the broadcasting spectrum, combining elements of documentary and drama in ever more fascinating and bewildering combinations, the tradition of the social documentary is under attack. But is this challenge to the form entirely a bad thing? What can we learn from it and how can those of us whose film-making has emerged from the Griersonian tradition of civic responsibility (inherited from Britain) revitalise documentary under the regime of the market economy?

This article explores the seismic upheavals that are happening in factual TV and their effects on the documentary form. It examines how these are being played out on ‘our ABC’ and draws on my experience as an independent documentary-maker in trying to find a way forward.

THE CHALLENGE TO DOCUMENTARY

Historically, the documentary tradition has been propelled by the desire for social progress. Because of its perceived special relationship to ‘the real’, documentary in its earliest forms was placed alongside the discourses of science and the humanities as part of the shared project of the Enlightenment. Once John Grierson, the founder of the British documentary movement in the 1920s, had articulated his notion of ‘cinema as a pulpit’, documentary film became ‘a call to action’.¹

In arguing for social change through their films, documentary-makers have always traded on the advantage (whether absolutely true or not) of claiming a direct relationship between their recorded mate-
rial and the real world. Now however, the introduction of hybrid forms of factual/fictional programming such as ‘docuseries’, so-called ‘reality TV’ and the latest genre of ‘reality game shows’, threatens to undermine the ‘truth’ status which documentary has long enjoyed. Moreover, ‘traditional’ social documentary is being displaced by these new forms of ‘lighter’ factual entertainment because they are achieving a popularity which ‘serious’ documentary, tagged these days by TV programmers as ‘slash your wrists’ material, seems unable to achieve (I don’t include here the glut of makeover and lifestyle programmes, preferring to leave them in the ‘infotainment’ category).

To what degree documentaries have ever really influenced social progress is a moot point but at least they have generally taken up the wider task of the arts, which is to challenge the status quo. That cannot be said of the new forms of factual programming which are steadily displacing them. However, in trying to compete with other forms of television to make our films more ‘acceptable’, it may be that we have tended to undercut our own goals as responsible documentary-makers.

THE APPEAL OF NARRATIVE

Television as a medium has become deeply complicit in the blurring of fact and fiction. I recall several years ago, Geoff Barnes, the then Commissioning Editor for Documentaries at the ABC, calling for documentary-makers to stop ‘navel gazing’ and get on with telling ‘cracking good yarns’. Documentary, he said, had a new role to fill, as a cheap
alternative to drama. This statement heralded a new documentary format on the ABC, that of the half-hour series which is also of course, the format of TV soaps.  

Suddenly, we were all reading (or re-reading) Linda Seger’s *How to Make a Good Script Great*, a text for writers of fiction, and learning to make effective use of the dramaturg’s devices of the three-act structure, conflict, character development, plot twists and resolution. Nor did this trend remain confined to social documentary-makers. David Parer, renowned for his wildlife films, speaks about the need to construct a good drama in a nature film, with creatures that face a struggle for survival, half-a-dozen high points to build your programme around and a dramatic climax several minutes from the end.  

Narrative structure has always been a part of documentary making as it has of all forms of storytelling. It isn’t that narrative in documentary is something new but it has tended to become the ‘be all and end all’. Since making *Least Said, Soonest Mended* (2000), a personal documentary about my own family, I have found myself questioning this obsession with narrative drive and technique. Aside from the ethical issues of publicly exposing private lives, making this film brought home to me the ‘price’ of bowing to the requirements of ‘telling ripping yarns’.  

Suddenly one’s own family members become ‘characters in a drama’, grist to the mill of that essential dramatic ingredient, ‘conflict’. Presenting each individual as a dignified, rounded human being becomes impossible when all character development not directly related to the central narrative has to be cut for the sake of story and length. And, as for the required ‘resolution’ of the story, real life doesn’t lend itself to the imposition of neat, upbeat endings which the programmers demand.  

Worse though is the way one becomes a pariah, feeding off one’s own or others’ travails for the sake of the dramatic approach. This has been made nowhere more clear to me than in the chilling but startlingly honest admission by Vanessa Gorman in a piece she wrote for *The Age* about her documentary, *Losing Layla* (2001). The film set out to be a record of her desire to have a baby and the effects of this on her life and relationships. However, the joyful moment of birth turns into a nightmare as it becomes apparent that the baby won’t survive. Gorman writes that even as her baby lay dying beside her, ‘As a documentary-maker, even in the depths of my shock and anguish, I understood that the film had taken a “dramatic” turn’.  

The pressure on documentary-makers has increased as the marketplace has become more competitive and public broadcasters more focused on ratings. In Europe this pressure has resulted in a moral panic over a number of documentaries which, in order to ‘deliver the goods’, have used faked sequences as if they are real. The most well known of these cases, *The Connection*, resulted in
England’s Carlton TV being fined two million pounds for ‘breach of public trust’.  

At the same time that documentary-makers have been busy emulating the techniques of drama, makers of fiction films have increasingly incorporated documentary techniques (e.g. hand-held camera, grainy image, naturalistic soundtrack and the jumpcut) into their films to give them a more authentic feel. This blurring of documentary and drama has made it harder to tell whether a film is obviously a documentary or not. That’s not a big issue for the few doco-makers whose films tend to be viewed in the cinema, where, as a minority form, documentary is clearly distinguishable from the Hollywood feature. But when half the TV schedule is ‘non-fiction’ the problem of defining what distinguishes documentary from a host of factual, fictional and hybrid forms becomes much more difficult.

THE ADVENT OF FIRST PERSON CONFESSION

Over the last decade or two the wholesale transfer of documentary from the public arena of the theatre to the domestic space of the living room, combined with the essentially ephemeral nature of TV, has allied documentary with the personal and the private as well as the dramatic. In that time there has been a societal shift towards focusing on individual subjective experience at the expense of the bigger picture. Personal confession in public is all the rage these days, as a glance at daytime TV chat shows demonstrates. Whilst TV is a public domain, the main location for watching it is the private space of the domestic lounge room, a space which suits the confessional mode. In contrast to the other public domain of cinema, the TV viewing experience is largely an internalised one, unlikely to result in vigorous debate about social issues with friends afterwards in a café.

The trend towards the inversion of private and public coincided with developments in video technology which placed a cheap camcorder in the hands of almost anyone who wanted one. Suddenly ordinary people became ‘empowered’ and personal confession had the means to multiply. Programmes based on amateur
footage and surveillance proliferated on TV, while among documentary-makers the camcorder revolution led to a new fad for ‘fly on the wall’ documentaries, an approach dating back to the Direct Cinema movement of the 1960s.

As the English cultural and media studies commentator, Jon Dovey, points out, through the advent of the camcorder the dominant documentary practice began to focus on ‘the subjective, local and confessional rather than the objective, general and rational’ and it is this trend that has given doco-makers (formerly reticent about putting themselves in front of the camera) ‘permission’ to make personal films. In his book Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television, Dovey extends his observations to the hybrid forms of factual TV which took the programming schedules by storm in the early 1990s. It is illuminating to draw on his and others’ arguments in a summary of these genres.

**THE DOCUSOAP**

The trend towards the subjective, confessional mode led to the invention of the hybrid documentary form of the docusoap in which the observational approach of ‘fly-on-the-wall’ veracity is married to the fictional ‘soap opera’ format and presented like a drama series. The television phenomenon of the late 1990s, docusoaps are usually set around one location and use the day-to-day chronology of the fictional soap. They employ multiple storylines and characters selected for their ability to perform rather than their personal stories. They are light entertainment docs which value everyday experience over ‘expert’ opinion and in doing so make celebrities out of ordinary people.

Although they arose out of the Direct Cinema approach of ‘behind the scenes’ scrutiny of institutions, docusoaps have dropped the noble aim of bringing governments or corporations to account, in favour of taking viewers into organisations dedicated to consumerism (airports, opera companies, cruise ships etc.) so that viewers can indulge in what John Corner of Liverpool University has tagged ‘nosy sociability’.

While, to quote Jon Dovey, the docusoap genre provides ‘a portrait of the operations of the new service economy’, there is no attempt to contextualise or explain how it actually operates. We are simply shown a world in which ‘this is how it is’. ‘Why it is so’ is never explored. Storylines that mix the trivial and the serious, characters that never develop and the return of the ‘voice of god’ narration produce a ‘fixed’ account which deters debate and leaves no room for interpretation.

Dovey concludes:

> How are we to understand documentary’s continuing ‘claim on the real’ if the difference between fact and fiction is deliberately blurred in the structure and address of the text itself? And if the documentary project is about ‘making arguments about a shared world’, how is it that these so-called documentaries make no argument whatsoever? In its attachment to the particular at the expense of representations that address the social body (the docusoap) typifies the problems of the Griersonian documentary legacy.

**REALITY TV**

Camcorder culture also led to the hybrid, factual form of so-called ‘Reality TV’, which in its earliest incarnations was characterised by a focus on natural disasters, crime and the emergency services. The genre employed grainy camcorder footage and eye-witness testimony combined with dramatic reconstructions, ‘authoritative’ narration and ‘professional’ comment, in a format borrowed from the ‘cop show’ genre. This mix of factual and fictional devices was high in commodity value, being transferable from one country to another (police and emergency workers look roughly the same anywhere) and providing a formula for local spin-offs. Its cultural value was more questionable, with the ‘fons’ claiming that reality TV provided democratic empowerment of ordinary people, while the ‘againsts’ argued that it was trash TV symptomatic of the ‘dumbing down’ of the medium.

Dovey argues that ‘in its constant restate-ment of a melodramatic theatre of horror’ this brand of Reality TV ‘privileges individuality and self-responsibility over and above sociality or interconnectedness’. There is no attempt to explain crime in this world, where the right to personal security supercedes the right to education, employment or housing. It’s a world where emergency service workers (‘just doing their job’) are the heroic representa-

tives of the state, preserving our personal security in the face of the ‘viruses’ of deviance and social chaos.

**REALITY TV MORPHS INTO BIG BROTHER**

But the development of reality TV didn’t stop with Emergency 000 and Funniest Home Videos. The biggest breakthrough in audience popularity has come with the ingenious, hybrid combination of game show, fly-on-the-wall documentary, talk show and soap opera into a new genre of ‘Reality Game Shows’, such as the phenomenally successful Big Brother.

These shows also foreground the ordinary, with participants becoming famous just for being themselves. Moreover, as Jane Roscoe, Head of Screen Studies at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, points out, by encouraging ordinary people to use the camera as a tool of confession and by drawing directly on soap opera’s ‘prioritization of the emotional’, these types of programmes legitimise gossip.

Big Brother is a ‘human zoo’ where we can watch the participants twenty-four hours a day doing mostly nothing in particular. While no-one really pretends that the show is anything other than the TV equivalent of McDonalds, there are aspects of such formats which give cause for thought to documentary-makers. Firstly, there is no attempt to pretend that the cameras aren’t there. Indeed, the participants want to be seen and know they are under constant view. Secondly, there is a performative aspect which is also acknowledged and which the participants willingly enter into.

Although the notion of ‘naturalism’ in documentary has always been somewhat suspect it is nevertheless a founding marker of documentary integrity. In this sense, Big Brother and shows like it seem refreshing unhampered (I don’t mean unconstrasted) compared to the process of documentary making, in which we generally: a) deal with reluctant, or at least ambivalent, participants, b) try to create the illusion of no camera being present, and c) like to think that people are behaving naturally.

While as ‘serious’ film-makers we may wish to occupy the moral high ground in
the debate about Reality TV, it can be argued that in some respects the latter exhibits a more honest approach than our own. Moreover, for those who denounce Big Brother, Survivor etc. as the epitomy of trash TV, what they have to explain is that, like the docuseries of the late nineties, the format is hugely popular. Roscoe is one who suggests that a large part of this popularity lies in a new mode of engagement with the audience. In Big Brother the participants have to be their authentic selves in order to gain audience sympathy but they also have to perform (and connive) to win. If they go too far in either direction they lose. It is suggested that deciphering this complicated combination of authenticity and performance (and voting accordingly) is what makes the viewing process so enticing. This entertaining challenge of spotting who’s a fraud and who’s genuine is a development on the docuseries.\(^\text{13}\)

**THE NEW ENTERTAINMENT IMPERATIVE**

John Corner categorises the central purpose to which documentary has been put over the years as firstly the project of civics (the legacy of Grierson), secondly reportage (resulting from the development of portable film equipment with synchronised sound) and thirdly alternative perspectives (arising from the democratisation of the production process). Now comes the fourth era, that of documentary as ‘diversion’, i.e. a form of popular factual entertainment.\(^\text{14}\) The main characteristics which Corner identifies as marking the move to ‘documentary as diversion’ are: the borrowing between fact and fiction, the focus on the performative and changes in audience interaction.

The move towards this new imperative of entertainment is connected to the quest for ratings, which is linked to the requirement that public broadcasters become less reliant on the public purse. The orthodox view is that if the latter is to remain part of the funding formula then such broadcasters should serve as wide a spectrum of the community as possible. Furthermore, what’s wrong with wanting one’s output to be popular?

Now, whilst we’ve never expected Australian commercial broadcasters to take social documentary seriously, the ABC has a particular charter, laid down by the

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**AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION ACT 1983, SECTION 6.** The charter requires it to ‘contribute to a sense of national identity’, ‘to inform and entertain’ and ‘to educate’, thus giving it certain obligations to indeed take documentary seriously. However, a clear indication of the shift in TV broadcasting towards the ‘entertainment imperative’ can be seen in the current direction of ABC TV which has now consigned substantial, independent social documentary to after ten o’clock at night.

Apart from its blockbuster strand The Big Picture (which of late has featured big budget, overseas science series about dinosaurs, space, volcanoes and genetics) and what seems to be an allocation for history on Sunday nights, the ABC’s only prime time ‘documentary’ slot is Reality Bites, the latest incarnation of its half-hour slot at eight o’clock on Tuesday evenings. As its name implies, this strand is geared to ‘lighter snacks’ of the reality TV/docuseries ilk. Meanwhile, the traditional flagship of the hearty, one-hour documentary meal, True Stories, has been relegated to 10pm on Thursdays, outside of prime time and currently following three, half-hour comedy shows in a row.

There is great concern among film-makers about what is perceived as an increasingly dismissive attitude by the ABC towards serious, Australian, independent social documentary. It seems that ABC TV is quite happy to abdicate its responsibility in this area to SBS Independent, which has developed a very high reputation for its commitment to social documentary and to the documentary community. Indeed, one of the differences between the two organisations is that SBSI has retained Commissioning Editors for Documentary, whereas the ABC has not. Instead it employs two Executive Producers in its Documentary department, responsible not to a documentary commissioning editor but to the Head of Factual. There now appears to be no-one at the ABC specifically responsible for commissioning independent documentaries.

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**DOCUMENTARY AS ARGUMENT**

You may ask, ‘what’s wrong with entertainment as an imperative anyway?’. Entertainment has never been the priority in the documentary tradition. Maybe Grierson was a dour, old Scottish protestant and as contemporary documentary-makers we’ve had to shake off the ‘worthy but dull’ tag and learn to loosen up a bit (and I think we’ve done that pretty well). But whatever its changing manifestations through the years, the primary intention of the social documentary has always been to argue and to influence.

We have been and are challengers first and foremost, not entertainers. We are concerned with truth, we mount arguments, we provoke debate and along the way we hope our audiences will laugh and cry. But once entertainment is the imperative then ‘truth’ becomes of secondary importance.

It is thus worrying when one looks up the ABC TV Documentary department’s website, to find that the ABC’s charter has been reversed and that it is looking for programmes that ‘entertain and inform’ (my italics) rather than vice versa. Now, I’m the first to concede that ‘inform’ has that killer ring of boredom about it. It’s not the word I would choose, but rather than expanding on its meaning it has been simply relegated to a role after that of entertainment.
THE LATEST GENRE OF ‘WHAT IF…’

So just what is the ABC interested in these days under the category of ‘documentary’? Although it, like most public broadcasters, has been reticent about jumping onto the ‘reality game show’ bandwagon there is another light entertainment hybrid genre of ‘constructed documentary’ which is related to the game show and which has been developed by the likes of the BBC and sold on to the ABC. The latter screened several such half-hour series in 2001 in its Reality Bites slot.

These ‘documentaries’ contrive to put ordinary people into unusual situations and then stand back to watch the results, which usually involve personal embarrassment. Back to the Floor sent factory managers and restaurant owners onto the shop floor and into the kitchen to see how they would cope with the consequences of their own management decisions (ha ha). Can You Live Without It deprived ordinary people of their ‘support’ mechanisms (e.g. the husband of his wife, the family of its supermarket, the manager of his secretary) and recorded the (predictably hilarious) consequences. The Ex Files brought people who’d been lovers in their youth back together to see what would happen (nothing funny here!).

None of these ‘What If …’ series are predicated on another ‘founding marker’ of the documentary form, i.e. the notion that what happens would have happened anyway had the camera not been there. Here the ‘precipitating incident’, to use dramatic parlance, is constructed solely for the purpose of the programme.

The degree to which this is transgression in documentary terms is debatable because, as with the notion of ‘naturalism’ in documentary, the notion of ‘non-interference’ has also always been somewhat suspect. Although we don’t usually engineer the central narrative in a documentary, a certain amount of massaging does go on and the film-making process often acts as a catalyst, provoking events which are filmed. The notion of camera as catalyst was first enshrined in the work of Jean Rouch, founder of the French Cinema Verité movement in the 1960s and became the alternative to the ‘hands-off’, observational approach of the American Direct Cinema movement.

However, issues of non-interference apart (and I would argue that acting as a catalyst is different to setting up the entire box and dice, which is really a ‘game show’ approach), whilst it can possibly be argued that programmes of the ‘what if …’ ilk have more educational content than your average docusoap, they still generally lack any serious contextual analysis. The new ‘dramatic’ ingredient which these programmes do offer and which docuosaps don’t is ‘character development’. Through going without his secretary for two weeks, or going back onto the shop floor, our manager ‘learns some lessons’ and (so the idea goes) changes for the better as a result.

An interesting example of dressing up the ‘what if …’ genre with a strong ‘educational’ role which then justifies inclusion in a more serious programming slot is The 1940s House, successor to Britain’s Channel 4 series The 1900 House. This series of five one-hour episodes was screened recently by the ABC on Sunday nights in prime time. The show won its ratings slot in the over-40s demographic.

In The 1940s House a chosen family become guinea pigs in an experiment to see how they will cope with the living conditions of London during the blitz. A mock cabinet of history experts decide what deprivations to visit on the family and when, explaining as they go a whole lot of interesting history about World War II, rationing, bomb shelters etc. In this sense there is a wider contextual analysis beyond the family’s simulated experience but it is largely an analysis of the past and harmless to the contemporary status quo.

The media often tag these kinds of shows as ‘off-beat documentaries’ but Brian Courtis in a review in The Sunday Age is more rigorous, describing The 1940s House as ‘part psychology experiment, part history lesson and TV game show’. The question is, can it legitimately be described as a documentary and, more to the point, does this matter?

MAGIC REALISM IN THE BUSH

It is not just overseas product that is pushing the boundaries with hybrid docs. One of the most interesting series shown recently in Reality Bites, alongside bland docusoap fare such as Academy (behind the scenes in the armed forces) and the more challenging Nurses (which used a strong video diary element), is Bush Mechanics. This is the highest rating show featuring Aboriginal Australians ever screened by the ABC, consistently rating higher than most documentaries and on a par with The 7.30 Report. It was presold as a concept to ABC TV Documentaries and is described in the publicity material as a blend of ‘observational documentary’, ‘drama’ and ‘magic realism’ (my emphasis).

Bush Mechanics follows the adventures of a group of Warlpiri men from Yuendumu and the bombed out cars which they manage to keep on the road long after their use-by date. It is shot in the style of a drama (with bonnet-mounted cameras etc.) and combines documentary footage with improvised ‘acting’, reconstructions, fast motion effects, sound effects and music. Jumpcuts are used to suggest the appearance from nowhere (or somewhere) of Jupurrula, ‘the magic mechanic’, who regularly rescues the adventurers with a new car-repair trick just when all seems lost. Whatever the symbolism of this ‘magic realist’ device it is a long way from the traditional notion of documentary veracity.

Described by The Age (incorrectly, which reflects the media’s ‘genre confusion’ about hybrid TV) as an ‘Australian reality TV series’, the show’s publicity material tends to use the language of drama production, referring for example to the participants being ‘on set’ during filming. Whatever the blurring of fact and fiction, the achievement of this series is that it firmly buys out of the victim tradition of films (a lot of them docos) about Aborigines and in to a positive representation of them as people acting on their environment rather than being acted upon, and doing so with humour, camaraderie and ingenuity.

It’s a non-patronising depiction which, for a change, by-passes the hackneyed problems of Aboriginal dispossession (there’s not a petrol sniffer in sight, although there are black fellas in jail and anecdotal references to past maltreatment). Yet behind all the humour and car
ry-on we know (not because we’re told but because we can see it) that the need to come up with ever more ingenious ways of keeping their cars on the road is not essentially about the geographical isolation of Aboriginal bush communities but about chronic poverty.

So, is *Bush Mechanics* a documentary series? After all, it was commissioned by ABC Documentaries and made with production funding from Film Australia’s National Interest Program, which supports the production of culturally specific documentaries and educational programmes. Some of it is in the ‘documentary mode’ but much of it is improvised drama and one suspects that the storylines were concocted for the filming rather than vice versa.

In terms of ‘founding markers’ and ‘documentary tradition’ I doubt whether *Bush Mechanics* meets the criteria of a documentary. But the ABC doesn’t care, because a lot of people watched it.

**THE DOCUMENTARY PACT**

Audiences don’t seem to be suffering the same ‘genre confusion’ as the print media in the face of a multiplicity of hybrid forms of factual TV. Indeed, the popularity of many of these shows demonstrates that people are willingly engaging with them. Presumably, rather than wondering ‘is this a documentary or not?’ audiences are intuitively figuring out how to ‘receive’ the latest offering just as they evaluate the latest drama or soap opera. However, if a documentary deliberately tries to pull the wool over viewers’ eyes and this is exposed, then they (or the media) react accordingly. Hence the European furore over ‘faked’ documentaries and educational programmes. Of course, where one draws the line between ‘some construction’ and ‘fakery’ is a grey area. But once that pact becomes undermined or unsustainable (for example, if it is sacrificed in the name of the imperative to entertain) then documentary as a form is dead. Hence, it is the joint responsibility of documentary-makers and those who commission our work to ensure that audiences can continue to trust the integrity of documentary.

This requires an increasingly complex vigilance, not least because spotting what is fake is complicated by new developments in technology. Once upon a time, seeing might have been believing but today the seamless integration of ‘reality’ and computer-generated imagery (displayed for example in expensive series like *Dinosaurs and Space*) under-mines this assumption to the point where we cannot necessarily believe anything we see in a film or on TV.57

**REVITALISING THE DOCUMENTARY PROJECT**

For those like me, who still regard ‘documentary’ as a useful term and see themselves as part of an identifiable community of film-makers, the future role of documentary is a crucial issue. The problem is that we are being steadily moved over. Not only are prime time slots disappearing and budgets lower but the proportion of screen time and therefore money given to longer form (i.e. fifty minutes and over) documentary programmes must be decreasing to make room for hybrid factual programmes, docusoaps and light entertainment half-hours financed from the same documentary funding sources. The danger is that these new formats will become the ‘standard’ by which all others are measured.

So what is it that’s being lost here? Why do we need the kind of independent social documentaries to which I am referring and what is it that they offer which these new hybrid forms don’t? I would suggest that the distinctive characteristics include:

1. The relatively long time taken over the process.

Typically, a TV-hour documentary takes a year or more in development and six months to a year in production (longer if the film is a longitudinal study of its subject), including around three months of editing.

2. Complexity and depth.

The long lead-in time for research and the careful working of the material in the edit suite after shooting allows the opportunity for a documentary to mine the complexities of its subject and explore this in depth. Humanity is not, by and large, simply divided into ‘goodies and bad-dies’ and the human condition is riddled with contradictions and paradoxes. Good documentaries acknowledge this.

3. A questioning stance.

As mentioned earlier, documentary making is about developing arguments and asking why things are so rather than merely showing ‘what is’. Of course, this can cause a degree of discomfort to any broadcaster dependent on the ruling powers for its existence but the purpose of documentary is surely to contribute critically and independently to the debates of the day.

4. A strong point of view.

Despite the tendency of public broadcasters to talk about ‘balance’ and ‘objectivity’, documentaries have always been a means of presenting strong and often personal points of view. Point of view is not necessarily synonymous with bias, however. The best praise a doco-maker can have is from someone she or he has featured who says, ‘look, I don’t agree with what your film is saying but you accurately represented my views’.

5. Cultural Specificity.

The funding of independent, social documentary has traditionally been acknowledged as an important means of reflecting Australian life, identity and issues to an Australian audience. This has never barred Australian film-makers from looking at wider regional subjects and of course many issues of Australian life overlap those of other countries. However, culturally specific documentaries don’t seem to travel as well as culturally specific feature films and in today’s rat-
ings driven, cash-strapped atmosphere there is a growing view that docs should avoid ‘parochialism’ and go global. If this results in less films being made about Australia and Australian concerns then this will be a bad thing.

6. Accountability

The relationships between the docu-
mentary maker and her/his subjects are paramount. We are not paratroopers who parachute into communities and plunder their stories. Long-term, collaborative relationships are formed, characters are consulted in the editing where possible and the film-maker takes responsibility for carrying the completed film back to its contributors and being accountable.

I believe we need to argue strongly and passionately for this kind of documentary definition and its importance to a healthy society. However, making serious, analyti-
cal documentaries which deal with ideas as well as stories doesn’t mean we have to be didactic, interview only ‘experts’ or succumb to being ‘worthy but dull’.

AN EXAMPLE

There are many documentaries which manage to employ engaging, personal narratives and simultaneously offer a wider analysis which is sub-textual and therefore not simply educational. I think my own recent film, Least Said Soonest Mended, is an example of this. After all, this is a doco which could have been loaded with sociological data (I certainly did the research) and expert opinion about the history of adoption legislation, the numbers of single mothers coerced in the past to relinquish their babies etc. etc., in order to make an ‘issues film’ with a wider argument about the failings of social policy.

Instead, what I did was to tell a personal story about one family, my own. However, it seems that audiences read my family’s subjective experience as incorporating a wider story and hence a wider analysis (the documentary won a United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Award for ‘raising awareness of women’s rights and issues’). I believe this is primarily because of the ‘mode of address’ of the film’s characters. Each of them tells their personal story but positions them-

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selves as representative of (or in opposi-
tion to) a wider societal group.

My mum says something like ‘in those
days there was nothing else to do but
take the doctor’s advice and go for adop-
tion’. My sister Val talks of ‘the conveyor belt’ of single mothers going through the ‘adoption system’. Karen, who was adopted, says, ‘you see people on TV who burst into tears when they meet
their birth parents, well I’m not like that’. As John Dovey says in discussing other examples of this mode of address, each person ‘declares their identity and frames it within a social context’ and in doing so a form of ‘public address’ is constructed.18

Thus, this documentary, while fore-
grounding the subjective in a first person, confessional manner, refers to the wider world, constantly throwing into question ‘why things were (or are) as they were (or are’) and declaring through the stories of those who speak the need for change.

To quote Dovey, such an approach remains:

close to Grierson’s original thinking—that
film was to be used as part of the mis-
sion to explain one part of the society for
another with the aim of binding the viewer
within the terms of social democratic
consent … (thus) combining the appeal
of confessional TV with the historical mis-
sion of documentary to offer insight into
the social body.19

This then is the responsibility of ‘seri-
ous’ documentary-makers—not to just
be serious but to engage in new forms of
analysis and argument rather than simply
abandon analysis and argument. If we
don’t take on this responsibility and per-
suade the likes of the ABC that it is theirs
too then the future is bleak.

Dovey’s examination of the place of doc-
umentary in British television today leads
him to the chilling conclusion that: ‘The
British core TV documentary now reflects
a framework in which ‘issues’ and ‘social
inquiry’ are to be actively avoided in
favour of entertainment and diversion’.20

The way things are going, the same may
soon be said of Australia.

ENDNOTES

1. For a summary of the career of John

Grierson (1898–1972) see Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film by Erik
2. See for example ‘Fact fills the gaps in
fiction’, The Age Green Guide, 11
November 1999, p. 3.
3. See ‘David Parer ACS—Documentary
Film-Maker’, Australian Cinematogra-
4. ‘Losing Layla’ by Vanessa Gorman, The
Age Saturday Extra, 24 February 2001,
p. 4.
5. See Lies, More Lies and Documentaries
by Brian Winston, British Film Institute,
2000.
6. Jon Dovey, Freakshow: First Person
Media and Factual Television, Pluto
7. See John Corner, ‘What Do We Know
About Documentary?’ in Media, Culture
and Society, vol. 22, no. 5.
9. ibid, p. 138
10. ibid, p. 95.
Factual Hybrid Television’, Media Inter-
national Australia Incorporating Culture
and Policy, no. 100, August 2001.
12. ibid, p. 13.
14. John Corner, ‘Documentary in a Post-
Documentary Culture? A Note on Forms
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15. Brian Courtis, ‘Critic’s Choice’, The
17. For a summary of contemporary
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