50 Years of British TV Documentaries.

A Diary of decline by a film editor.

Simon Rose 2014

In 1964, when I left school and got my first job in the TV industry, documentaries seemed to hold endless opportunities. Many directors hoped their films would change the world for the better and I think to some extent they did. A large proportion of the children I went to school with were ignorant, racist, homophobic and xenophobic. But in the sixties audiences were viewing life in many different parts of the world for the first time. They were being invited to empathise with people whose lives were different from their own; hunter-gatherers, prostitutes, factory workers, gentry…. In my opinion this led to a better educated and more tolerant society. Documentary directors didn't just hold up a mirror. Many tried to open the audience's minds to ideas that differed from the established view.

It is easy to romanticise the past as a 'golden age' and I recognise that there were a great number of extremely bad documentaries made in every decade (I edited a few of them!) But there used to be some freedom to make original, thought provoking films. That freedom has all but gone and I was in the thick of it, as it disappeared around us.

My first job was as a projectionist in a 16mm dubbing theatre. Almost all documentaries were shot on 16mm in those days and I got to see a lot of them. Every day the cans for a different production would turn up. Quality varied enormously but I learned that if certain directors or editors were booked in we could expect something special. I remember 'The Opium Trail' (1964) directed by Adrian Cowell and shot by Chris Menges, 'Seven Up' (1964) directed by Paul Almond for World In Action and 'Up the Junction' (1965) directed by Ken Loach.

Two films in particular seared into my brain as I peered through the glass at the back of the theatre. They were 'Culloden' (1964) and 'The War Game' (1965). Both were directed by Peter Watkins and they influenced me for the rest of my life. It wasn't so much their content that was revolutionary, as their style. They looked like news film grabbed on a battlefield (the black and white stock was forced in processing to give extra grain and the camera juddered occasionally because Watkins kicked the tripod). But they patently weren't news; the first was about the battle of Culloden in 1746 and the second was set in the future

when nuclear deterrence had failed and Britain was being bombarded with hydrogen bombs.

The faces of the clansmen that peered at the camera on Culloden Moor with rain running down their hair didn't look like actors, and they weren't. They were amateurs, many descendants of the original clansmen, who for years onward would meet up to remember the powerful experience of making that documentary. And the fire fighters who helped in the making of 'The War Game' did so because they had serious doubts about the government's plans for dealing with a nuclear war. Peter had a way of getting everyone committed to his projects. I'm sure we worked above and beyond what we were being paid for in the dubbing theatre, because we thought 'Culloden' and 'The War Game' were worth it.

Both films are subtly subversive in two ways: 1. They show ordinary people being killed in wars that they were never consulted on and had little chance of escaping. 2. Events from centuries past and the possible future are presented as viscerally convincing 'current affairs' style documentaries, so the audience may be led to wonder, 'How true is any documentary'? On the face of it the commentary is factual but the voice of the narrator is full of suppressed emotion. The emotion clearly came from Watkins and that made me think, how objective can a filmmaker be? And if they can, should they? Surely they should be honest about their feelings. Looking at the faces of the men and women who occasionally glanced at me through the lens with an almost accusatory expression, I didn't just feel like a passive observer, I felt involved; as though this was something maybe I could do something about. It seemed as though this involvement of participants and audience might be a positive way forward for documentaries.

I remember Lou Hanks, who was mixing the sound, asked Peter if he thought the BBC would allow The War Game to be shown. At the time Peter was optimistic. In fact the BBC banned it from television anywhere in the world. Peter Watkins left the BBC and two years later left the UK for a life in exile. But paradoxically, the fact that Watkins, who was still in his twenties and had only been in the corporation for three years, was allowed to make a film that was so revolutionary in both content and style shows the freedom that was given to television directors in those days. Kenneth Tynan, in The Observer, said it was one film that might have changed the world. A year later, Ken Loach made drama/doc 'Cathy Come Home' (1966) which did bring about a change in legislation.

Now very few TV directors expect their programs to change anything. The ambition is for a large audience and a step up the ladder that might lead to a job as an executive producer or even a commissioning editor.

Directors also show little interest in bringing people closer together. They have been taught that what attracts a large audience is conflict. Differences are exaggerated, and not only between people. I recently met a wildlife cameraman who shot many beautiful scenes for David Attenborough's BBC series. He was becoming disillusioned, because producers now want wildlife to appear dangerous. They want 'jeopardy' (One of TV's favourite buzzwords). The cameraman thought it was wrong to make people afraid of the natural world when, in fact, most animals are harmless, unless they are afraid themselves. To me that typifies what is happening across the field of TV documentaries.

At first I thought I wanted to be a cameraman; it was glamorous and exciting, but then I realised that they were never around at the decisive time of making a film. Editors seemed to have a real influence on the final result. I was impressed by the sheer skill, intelligence and patient good humour of editors like Dai Vaughan and Ted Roberts and decided I wanted to be an editor.
I got a job as an assistant and then editor on 'Man Alive' which was a weekly 50 minute documentary slot on BBC2. With only three channels there were not many documentaries. When I commuted to work in the morning after transmission there was a good chance someone would be talking about the film I had just cut. Newspapers took the series seriously and usually reviewed it. Maybe, with hindsight, we had too much influence.

'Man Alive' was edited by Desmond Wilcox, an ex Fleet Street journalist and Bill Morton who claimed to have cut for Orson Welles. There was a healthy rivalry between the reporters, who tended to be more interested in words, and the directors (known as producers in the BBC) who tried to be visual and filmic. It felt democratic and open; anybody could throw in an idea at a viewing, including assistants. Desmond made a point of being 'anti-establishment'.
It was his way of getting us to feel we were all on the same side; 'making ground-breaking TV despite the boring old farts at the top'.

One incident I recall exemplifies the culture of the time; A few complaints had been received about swear-words on the latest Man Alive. The head of BBC 2 asked to see the programme. In those days films were transmitted directly from telecine so there was no video recording. A film viewing theatre was booked and in the meantime Desmond said, 'We better get rid of the swearing'. So we took the film to a dubbing theatre and re-mixed it with extra

traffic noise over the offending words. It was sent to the channel controller's viewing with a note from Desmond saying 'he couldn't detect the problem'!

That would never happen now, partly because there are no series editors around with those kinds of balls and partly because it depended on the loyalty of all the people who were in on the secret. Mainly, because it is more important to be seen as 'on board' with management than any consideration of what might make better TV.

Back in the 60s and 70s the forms documentaries took were widening in scope. Lightweight cameras and sound recorders and sensitive film stocks had allowed crews to become smaller and less intrusive, and different editing styles were being tried; many directors were making TV documentaries without narration. On 9th November 1970 Charles de Gaulle died. Panorama marked the occasion in the following way: They hired freelance cameraman Erik Durschmied and his sound recordist to capture the mood of the French people. A few days later they transmitted the edited film at peak viewing time on BBC1. There was no narration or music or interviews. As I recall it lasted about half-an-hour. There were scenes of people on a train reading newspapers, of an old man sweeping leaves in a cemetery. It made poetic use of images and natural sounds. It is impossible to imagine any television company transmitting a programme like that now, even at midnight!

Nowadays, if a world leader dies, all programmes follow a predictable format dependant on the time-slot available. A half-hour programme would be narrator-led. It would contain facts to be found in Wikipedia. It would be illustrated with stills and library footage. It would use sound-bites from 'experts' and ex-colleagues. If the leader was deemed to be on 'our side' it would take the form of a tribute. Otherwise there would be some critical comment. It would be practically identical on every channel. To me the change that has occurred in forty years seems a great loss.

In these days of directives from above, it's hard to believe there could once have been the idea that we should attempt to democratically arrive at films that were fair and honest. That's what Dai Vaughan describes in his book 'For Documentary'. During editing 'The Space Between Words' in 1972, the crew were regularly invited to the cutting room and asked if they thought the various participants were being portrayed fairly. Today, the idea that a producer would pay a film crew to spend time in an edit suite is unthinkable. The only concern producers have regarding 'contributors' is whether there is a risk of them suing the TV Company.

There has been an inexorable shift of power to the top. This has affected Documentary directors in particular. They have lost control of the films they are nominally responsible for.

During the 1960s directors as diverse as John Schlesinger, Jack Gold, Charlie Squires, Jenny Barraclough, Ken Loach, Ken Russell and Peter Watkins made documentaries and drama-documentaries for the BBC, each in their own distinctive style. Most of their films (with one notable exception!) got transmitted and the directors got due credit (even editors got credits in the Radio Times in those days!) Today most people would be hard pressed to name a single documentary director working for the BBC, and would certainly find it very difficult to detect any difference in their styles.

Admittedly most BBC directors made unremarkable use of the freedom and resources they were given. I had come from a background of amateur film making and often thought that the amateurs would give their eye teeth to have access to the budgets and creative technicians available to BBC directors. The corporation was structured like a branch of the armed forces. There were the officers (director/ producers) who were almost exclusively graduates of Oxford and Cambridge universities and were expected to come up with ideas. Then there were the 'other ranks' who sorted out the technicalities. Many of the directors I worked with were proud of the fact that they didn't know one lens from another or what effect a different focal length would have on a shot. (That was the cameraman's job).

It is probably no coincidence that some of the most creative documentaries made by the BBC came from directors like Peter Watkins, Ken Russell and John Schlesinger who, as ex-amateur film makers, had handled cameras and editing equipment themselves, and knew how to achieve the style they wanted. I came from an amateur film background myself and, although I admired the expertise and commitment in the professional world, I sometimes found it too rigid. To make good documentaries one has to experiment and I hate it if someone says, "We just don't do it that way".

In the late seventies I worked on the Horizon science series and the bar at BBC Kensington House seemed to be full of recent Oxbridge graduates, turning their theses into under-visualised documentaries. But there were still some older producers who had experienced far more varied lives before they joined the BBC. In 1976 I worked for Peter Adam who had grown up in Berlin during the war. He had travelled extensively in Europe doing various jobs before joining the BBC in the sixties. He certainly made full use of the freedom he was given.

We were working on an ‘Omnibus’ called ‘Spirit of Place’, about novelist Lawrence Durrell returning to his roots. Peter Adam researched the program thoroughly himself and arranged to meet Durrell in Greece. He drove down through France, picking up one of his favourite cameraman on the way. They sailed around the islands shooting on locations described in Durrell’s books. We edited for seven weeks in London. Humphrey Burton, who ran Omnibus, saw it once and made no changes before it was transmitted on BBC1 after the evening news. It was nominated for a BAFTA award.

Today any TV documentary, however innocuous, is checked at every stage, not only by people who assess the audience it is likely to achieve but by ‘the editorial policy department’ who judge it for ‘compliance’. This department has well intentioned aims; to check programmes for impartiality, accuracy, fairness and editorial integrity. But some of these qualities are difficult to measure and the results sometimes seem counter-productive.

For instance a film I cut about care homes was narrated by a young man who had spent his childhood in care homes and felt that it would be better if more children were adopted. This was judged to be ‘unbalanced’, even though it was clearly his view, and the program had to be altered to include more positive comments about care homes. Sometimes the result of ‘compliance’ is simply comic. For instance a man who was suspected of being a thief by the police but never charged had his face ‘fuzzed out’ and the little dog running by his side was transformed into a fuzzy ball!

The ultimate reason for loss of freedom in British TV was political. In 1986 Margaret Thatcher appointed Marmaduke Hussey as chairman of the BBCs board of governors. He was regarded by Thatcher as ‘One of us’ and was a friend of Rupert Murdoch, whose newspapers continuously attacked the BBC. In 1987 he sacked Alisdair Milne, the Director General, and replaced him with John Birt.

Birt introduced a ‘market economy’ to the BBC which was regarded by the government as the next best thing to privatisation. This involved every department buying and selling things from other departments, which required an army of managers and salesmen. In practice this meant that, as a freelance editor, I could no longer ring the lady in the gramophone library who knew thousands of music recordings by heart and would recommend one. Instead I had to fill in a form that went, via managers who had no idea what they were dealing with, to the correct department who then had to charge the programme I was working on for the music. It became cheaper for producers to buy discs from a record shop than use the corporation’s own facilities.

While management at the BBC blossomed, the actual people who made programmes; camerapersons, sound recordists, editors were asked to take voluntary redundancy. Those that remained were soon priced out by the market economy. As a freelance editor my only costs were the hire of a cutting room and an assistant. Staff editors were loaded with inflated costs to cover BBC infrastructure and management. It was soon decided that they were uneconomic and now the craft side of the BBC (which used to set the technical standards for the British TV industry) is almost totally casualised. The BBC is still top-heavy with management and the idea of programmes as a commodity prevails.

The government also decided that the market must rule more firmly at ITV, which was described by Thatcher as, “The last bastion of restrictive practices”. She was particularly enraged by Thames TV’s ‘Death on the Rock’ (1998). It presented evidence that British Special Forces had assassinated IRA members on Gibraltar. Previously ITV franchises had been awarded on the basis of quality, but in 1990 they were re-distributed to the highest bidder. Since then the quality of documentaries on ITV has dramatically declined; long running and highly regarded series like ‘World in Action’ (Granada) ‘Survival’ (Anglia) ‘This Week’ (Thames) ‘First Tuesday’ (Yorkshire TV) have disappeared.

In 1982 Channel four was launched to provide an alternative to BBC and ITV. Jeremy Isaacs, the chief executive, interpreted this in a liberal way. The independent producers and production companies who provided the programs to C4 were given a lot of freedom. Commissioning editors would regard their work as almost done once the programme was commissioned and would thank us for letting them come to the cutting room to see the result. Some remarkable documentaries were produced in the early years, but C4 changed dramatically.

In 1993 they started to sell their own advertising instead of being funded from ITV and the pressure to achieve high viewing figures grew. Gradually the freedom C4 had given producers and directors was eroded and commissioners started behaving more like executive producers. It seemed that at every viewing the commissioner (usually an ex-public school boy with an Essex accent) was expounding the latest theory on ‘what people like’. A mood of fear and bullying descended from above. What started as a remit to broadcast alternative programming has become, in their words, “Born to Shock”.

The small production companies and partnerships that serviced C4 were mostly set up by people who had left the BBC and ITV in the hope of making better programmes and more money.

Previously nobody had expected to become rich in documentaries; that were not the motivation, but it now became a possibility. Over the years the more business orientated individuals within companies moved to the top, and the more profitable companies bought out smaller ones. The move to multiple channels accelerated that trend. Accountants started taking over. Now, a small number of conglomerates dominate the independent sector.

The move to multiple broadcasters which started with Channel 5 and Sky in the late eighties was modelled on American TV and was claimed to give viewers more choice. Milton Shulman had said that British TV was the "least worst in the world" but suddenly we were being told we should emulate the USA. The UK had a strong tradition of documentaries dating back to the thirties, which had grown and diversified on TV. The US had also produced some notable documentaries but they were mainly aimed at the large screen and festivals. TV documentaries in The States are journalist led. Interviews come first and the visual material is called "B roll". Many are produced by PBS which takes its educational role boringly seriously. They taught us, "Tell the audience what they are going to see. Then show it to them. Then tell them what they have just seen". Producers told me "If we are making something for PBS, remember it is an irony free zone".

As the audience and advertising revenue were stretched thinner between different channels, executives became ever more obsessed with viewing figure. To me it would be better if one million people were engrossed by a documentary I had cut, than if six million half-watched it while doing something else. But advertisers don't see it that way. Even the BBC is constantly worried about viewing figures, because they have to justify the licence fee to the government of the day.

In the 1990s another advance in equipment design took place; Small lightweight video cameras, which met 'broadcast standards', became available. ('Broadcast Standards' keep changing; at that time Hi8 tape passed the test). They re-opened the door to observational documentaries which were becoming increasingly rare because of the cost of 16mm film. One of the last such series shot on film was 'The Police', directed and filmed by Charles Stewart in 1982. One episode, showing how police treated a rape victim, can claim to have changed the law in Britain. It led to the formation of specialist units, trained to be more sympathetic. But one thousand ten-minute rolls of

film were used on the series at a cost of about £100,000 in stock and processing alone.

Cheap Hi 8 tape, and the digital cameras that followed, could have led to a revolution in TV documentaries, but they didn't. On the whole they were used to make programs cheaper, not better. But In 1998 C4 television placed an unusually open ended commission with a producer at a small production company who had gained unprecedented access to Social Services. The remit was for three camerawomen with Hi 8 cameras to follow different cases involving children for a year. At the end of that time it would be decided how many films would be edited from the material. There was no stipulation on running lengths. The series called "The Decision" won an RTS award.

One of 'The Decision' films, edited by me, about a pair of twins being taken into care, was not transmitted because the boys did not give permission. Ten years later, when they were 21 and no longer under the control of Social Services, they gave the go ahead. Channel 4 was persuaded to fund an updated version of the film and transmit it. The RTS jury who awarded it the 2008 prize for 'best observational documentary' said *"Extraordinary and absolutely outstanding, a prime example of what documentary could – and should – do. Immensely compelling and very moving, the film gave viewers a profound insight into a process rarely, if ever, observed at such close quarters."* The commissioner said *"We wouldn't make that now".*

Formats imposed by executives rather than programmes made by people trying to be original rule the airwaves. We used to try and make documentaries that we would enjoy watching ourselves; I assumed that the audience had much the same level of intelligence and curiosity as me. Back in 1960, as part of their evidence to a government enquiry on the future of television, Granada TV had said "Never overestimate the audience's knowledge, but never underestimate their intelligence".

These days TV executives seem to view their audience as a different breed. Sometimes this attitude becomes clear. An editor friend of mine was at a viewing with an executive who later became channel controller. After watching the film she said, "Of course, I enjoyed it. But would someone who goes to a supermarket and buys Australian Chardonnay enjoy it?"

It is assumed that people are more at ease with the familiar than with new ideas. To me, the fascination of documentaries is that when one explores true stories they often turn out to be more surprising and dramatic than any drama writer could have imagined. But executives now demand that documentaries

are structured like drama or light entertainment. Anything counter-intuitive is ignored and documentaries have become less honest. Hyperbole and phoney exaggerated cliff-hangers are obligatory.

No documentary nowadays is complete without a presenter saying, “I’m longing to find out”. Either the presenter is an ‘expert’, in which case she already knows what she is “longing to find out”, or he is a ‘celebrity’ who has been scripted to sound enthusiastic about the subject. With the common parlance of documentary now based on transparent untruths the word itself starts to be meaningless.

The uniformity of today’s TV documentaries stems from a top-down structure. Directors usually have a series producer, an executive producer and a commissioning editor telling them what to do (usually three different things!). They are often expected to handle the camera and sometimes the microphones as well as everything else! They tend to overshoot (100 hours of rushes for a 1 hour programme is common) because they are trying to second-guess what their bosses might want and want to cover all eventualities. They are liable to be sacked at any time and cannot complain if they want to work again. (Another by-product of the Thatcher years is a complete loss of union power).

Directors, afraid of slipping behind the ridiculous target they have been set, urge editors to ‘Just start cutting’. This precludes any proper judgement of the material or any chance of discovering the more interesting truths that may lie buried in it. Often a different director will take over at the editing stage who has never met the people who were filmed, and a new job has been invented; ‘The edit producer’. Meanwhile, commissioning editors try to micro-manage every film from above.

Admittedly editors, as a clan, tend to moan. I sometimes chat to old friends about the ‘good old days’ of editing on film, and the way our work has been revolutionised by technical changes (first with the move from film to tape and then digital formats). But what gets me, and many others, angry has nothing to do with technicalities. It has to do with dumbing down, with lowering respect for the audience and the change of culture from one where making TV documentaries was seen as a worthwhile pursuit to one where the only aim is to make money.

A few years ago broadcasters would hire a high profile director such as Molly Dineen, Nick Broomfield or Kim Longinotto to make one film a year so they had something to enter for festivals. Even that token respect for the craft of

directing documentaries seems to have now been dropped. Any up and coming directors are kept firmly in their place. I remember working with a young director who won an award. When she was invited to the commissioning editor's office she was hoping for congratulations and the offer of more work. He coolly told her to get in touch if she had any interesting ideas. He also mentioned another up and coming director who he described as "getting too big for their boots". She decided to leave the TV industry.

I think that the uniformity of TV, together with the pretence of objectivity in documentaries, contribute to a feeling of helplessness in the audience. If every story, from the horrific to the frivolous, is treated in the same way; if every argument is balanced by an equally weighted counter-argument, aren't we bound to become cynical and disillusioned?

Peter Watkins has written about what he calls, 'The Monoform'; the almost universal filmic grammar which television and cinema use to impart information and entertainment. After he left Britain Watkins continued to make documentaries. Among them were 'Punishment Park' (1971, USA), 'Edvard Munch' (1974, Norway), 'The Journey' (1983 Sweden, Canada) and 'La Commune' (2001, France). In these films he strove to be less didactic and more democratic than is usual.

Watkins points out that in the 'Monoform' the average length of time given to individual shots has reduced over the years and now stands at about three seconds. He suggests that this constant barrage of images and sounds, which give the audience no time to reflect or question, is equivalent to brainwashing.

If a young person with the revolutionary ideas and commitment of Peter Watkins applied for a job at a British TV studio today, it is unlikely they would get inside. If they did, they would surely stay for even less time than Watkins spent at the BBC in the sixties. Maybe one day documentaries with the qualities of 'Culloden' and 'The War Game' will be made for TV, but at the moment that day seems a long way off.