The documentary film has long held a privileged place in the classroom. Most of the time, this has been because of its capacity to enrich the curriculum by artfully and credibly introducing relevant content, information, attitudes and themes. Until recently, however, it has been much less common for the documentary form itself to be considered as an object of study. But this may be precisely what is required as we encounter factual entertainments that challenge documentary’s traditional claims on truth and the trust of its audience. These developments, often associated with reality TV, have caused some to ask whether a screen format that has been produced across decades of cultural, institutional and technological change has finally done its dash.

Confident that the documentary project will continue to flourish, this article sketches the development of the documentary field in Australia and beyond, and offers a toolkit of critical approaches and resources to negotiate ‘the overwhelming array of styles and interpretive avenues afforded by documentary’.

The Australian documentary field

Since the Lumière Brothers’ agent, Marius Sestier, and Australian society photographer Walter Barnett filmed the 1896 Melbourne Cup, screen production grounded in actuality has been the glue sticking the Australian screen industry together. Across the years, the output of factual producers has circulated under a variety of labels, including topical, actuality, travelogue, industrial, sponsored, newsreel, current affairs, reality TV and factual entertainment – as well as documentary. Attempts to define and distinguish the documentary from this broader array of factual productions have often bedevilled its study, support and regulation. The task has been made no simpler by technological changes that have included the coming of the ‘talkies’ and colour; the advent of television broadcasting; the development of lightweight 16mm cameras and sync sound recording; the introduction of portable video technology; and, most recently, the digital revolution and the convergence of communication and information technologies.

Before television, documentary could be defined by its difference from the fictional narratives that dominate theatrical exhibition – in other words, as ‘nonfiction’. But after television, where a good 50 per cent of all programming is ‘nonfiction’, this simple opposition proved inadequate. At present, the Australian Content Standard for commercial television defines a ‘Documentary program’ as ‘a program that is a creative treatment of actuality other than a news, current affairs, sports coverage, magazine, infotainment or light entertainment program’. This definition, which is used to decide whether a factual production is a documentary and therefore eligible to access the producer offset that underwrites the Australian screen industry, is currently under review. The review stems from an Administrative Appeals Tribunal decision rebutting Screen Australia’s judgement that Lush House, a ten-part series featuring cleaning ‘guru’ Shannon Lush, was not a documentary but an entertainment, and thus ineligible for the 20 per cent tax break for broadcast documentaries.
Most people probably feel that they could confidently define what a documentary is. But the form has always been complex, and with the recent proliferation of reality TV, it is even more difficult to settle on an all-encompassing definition. PAT LAUGHERN outlines the methods of definition that have been used in the past, and proves that even in its ongoing transformation, the documentary continues to be crucial in the media classroom.
Eighty years earlier, John Grierson – who is generally credited with coining the phrase ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ – cautioned that ‘Documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand.’ Readily acknowledging that it was an elastic category, Grierson stressed that the use of ‘natural material’ separated the documentary from fictional film:

> Where the camera shot on the spot (whether it shot newsreel items or magazine items or discursive ‘interests’ or dramatised ‘interests’ or educational films or scientific films proper ...) in that fact was documentary.10

Grierson also pointed out that these different types of nonfiction ‘represent different qualities of observation, different intentions in observation, and, of course, very different powers and ambitions at the stage of organising material’.11 For Grierson and his associates, ‘documentary’ signified a ‘higher’ category distinguished by its evidential status, social purpose, creative authorship and educative aims. To put it in practical terms, a documentary typically took longer to conceptualise, research, shoot and edit than its more formulaic factual cousins. Grierson, the producer, was determined that not all nonfiction funding should go to the newsreels, which he characterised as ‘snip-snap’ that ‘avoid on the one hand the consideration of solid material, and escape, on the other, the solid consideration of any material’.12

Since the establishment of the Australian National Film Board near the end of World War II, documentary making in Australia has largely followed Grierson in seeking to serve an educative purpose and has generally been supported as a public good, prized not for its profitability but for its social, cultural and aesthetic benefits.13 Historically, of course, as the archive and the television guide both reveal, the ‘documentary’ has not been, and is not, a single, stable object. On the contrary, the documentary project has accommodated a fluid set of coexisting practices that can include narration, montage, observation, interview, dramatisation, docusoap, reality TV and more. The 2004 ACMA guidelines to the interpretation of documentary point out that ‘program types ... are on a continuum, with movement over time as new styles of program emerge and others lose popularity’.14 Indeed, the guidelines themselves can be understood as a response to reality television, which from the mid 1990s was occupying an increasing proportion of screen time globally.15

**Reality TV meets documentary**

Reality TV is a factual entertainment format that compiles raw footage from small crews, surveillance systems and the audience itself, and frequently incorporates elements of competition.16 One of the earliest examples in this cycle of programming in Australia was *Sylvania Waters* (1992). This ‘real-life’ soap opera was grounded in the experiences of a family in its own home, but factual entertainments such as *Big Brother Australia*...
Documentary and the critical toolkit

So what do these shifts in the documentary field mean for teachers, students, audiences and makers of nonfiction, be it dubbed factual entertainment, reality TV or documentary? And what are the implications for the users of these forms in screen education and wider curricula?23 As producers and consumers, just how should we proceed, critically and pedagogically?

A modest starting point might be to acknowledge the obvious; namely, that we are engaged with a complex project, which is often caught at various crossroads: between commercial and public broadcasting; between divergent technologies for production, distribution and exhibition; and between the sometimes-conflicting goals of entertaining, informing and instructing. This complexity requires us to consider not just the content of a documentary but also the treatment employed in its construction. We need to analyse both what a documentary is about and how it has been made.

Though its critics described The Colony as ‘Big Brother meets Survivor in period costume’,20 its makers successfully argued that their ‘living history’ series was eligible for documentary funding. Today, when network commissioning editors for documentary have largely been replaced by ‘heads of factual’ or ‘factual entertainment departments’, many now regard the term ‘documentary’ as a heritage brand whose ‘use by programme promoters suggests that the work in question is going to make greater demands on the viewer’s attention’.21 In light of this, some have questioned

with what legitimacy the new hybrid forms of the factual (which clearly have many generic affinities with the talk-show and the game-show) can claim to be documentary, when they are so manifestly not concerned with engaging with important issues relating to the socio-political world.22
Documentary and purpose: Why make documentaries?

Documentaries are made for many different reasons, but for most documentary makers a commitment to documentary is a commitment to the possibilities of testimony and discovery, backed by a belief that ways can be found to document what is happening or has happened to real people, and confidence that the exploration of experience can be shared with an audience. American scholar Michael Renov identifies four distinct purposes that underpin documentary production: to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyse or interrogate; or to express.30 Of course, the production of any particular documentary may be motivated by more than one of these purposes, and most makers share a desire to engage their audience.

Documentary modes: How are documentaries made?

Bill Nichols suggests that the documentary maker has a range of modes available to employ when addressing an audience.31 Over the years, Nichols and other scholars have revised this approach in response to various changes in production and distribution practices. Some familiar documentary modes include:

- The classic expository mode, which has its roots in the illustrated lecture. This mode, which often anchors the meaning of images by the use of voice-of-God narration, was established in cinematic documentary in the early days of film sound and played a major part in the tradition of citizen education promoted by John Grierson. At times, particularly in broadcast production, the narrator may be replaced by an on-screen presenter, or by the use of interview to advance the film’s argument. Though familiar, this mode can still surprise us. Over My Dead Body (Ian Walker, 2007) explores the trade in body parts after death and ‘is narrated by a fictional cadaver whom we follow through the perils of the body’s “afterlife”.’32

Documentary and genre: What types of documentary are there?

Genre is a widely used, if notoriously elusive, critical category. At times, the documentary field as a whole has been contrasted with the narrative feature film and regarded as a single genre. More usually, documentary is broken up into several (often overlapping) subgenres. Some of these are content-based, and readily discoverable in a television program schedule, a distributor’s catalogue, or even in a broadcaster’s guidelines for aspiring producers. Examples of subgenres defined by program content include natural history, arts, history, biography, travel, medicine, sport, religion, and science and technology.27 Michael Rabiger adopts another approach and differentiates between programs by using the concepts of point of view and time, development and structure. Rabiger identifies documentaries organised around the following: the single point of view of a character in the film; the point of view of multiple characters in the film; an omniscient point of view; the personal point of view of the filmmaker; and a reflexive point of view. He also suggests we can distinguish between the event-centred film, the process film, the journey film, the walled-city film and the historical film.28

Other documentary subgenres, such as the ethnographic, are linked to an academic discipline or cultural institution, or, as with the ‘animated’, ‘observational’ or ‘digital’ documentary, are identified by the use of a particular technique or technology.29

Screen Australia’s DIY DOCO; A Place to Think, a site celebrating Film Australia’s sixty years of documentary making; and the online version of the National Film Board of Canada’s Capturing Reality: The Art of Documentary (Pepita Ferrari, 2009).26

As we consider the range of documentaries and set out to understand just why and how a particular film has been made, we can draw on concepts that include genre, purpose, mode and project.
• The docudrama mode uses actors in a studio or on location to represent past or present situations that cannot be otherwise documented. It can suggest details of experience and behaviour, evoke qualities of emotion or memory, or portray and interpret evidence from a particular perspective for viewers to assess. This mode has been used intermittently for technical and aesthetic reasons from the early cinematic days of documentary; it has also featured in experimental documentary and, increasingly, in television documentaries that incorporate dramatic entertainment values.37 Peter Butt’s *Who Killed Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler* (2006) is one of many fine documentaries that adopt this mode.38

• The observational mode, which came to prominence in the early 1960s, uses portable cameras and sound-recording equipment to record a scene directly and then presents them from the viewpoint of an onlooker. This is often dubbed a ‘fly on the wall’ approach, and is marked by its refusal to interfere with events or impose a master narration on them. In its pure form, it is characterised by synchronous sound, long takes, and speech that is overheard rather than directed to the audience. Excellent Australian examples are *Rats in the Ranks* (Bob Connolly & Robin Anderson, 1996) and Michael Cordell’s *Year of the Dogs* (1997).39 There are two distinct observational approaches: ‘direct cinema’, with its ideal of remaining detached from what is being shot, and cinema vérité, in which camera and crew are ‘avowedly present and inquiring, ready to catalyze, if necessary, an interaction between participants or between participants and themselves’.40 Much of Dennis O’Rourke’s work, such as *Cannibal Tours* (1987), uses elements of the latter approach.41

• The participatory mode, which has developed from the early 1970s, uses portable cameras and sound-recording equipment to record a scene, but promotes communication between filmmaker and participants through techniques such as interview, talking heads and oral history testimony. The filmmaker often speaks directly to the participants in the film, and the camera is usually acknowledged. Multiple viewpoints are often encouraged and the argument is frequently left unresolved for the audience’s final judgement. Two fine examples are Nicole McCuaig’s *Black Soldier Blues* (2004) and Randall Wood’s *The Curse of the Gothic Symphony* (2012).42

• The poetic mode may be traced back to pioneering city symphonies such as Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin* (1927) or Joris Ivens’ *Rain* (1929). These films typically foreground the exploration of formal and conceptual associations in the medium, such as those between graphic qualities of line, movement and colour, and the qualities of sound. Some films, such as *Landslides* (Sarah Gibson & Susan Lambert, 1986), adopt this aesthetic approach throughout, but this mode is also an element in the construction of sequences and the development of montage strategies in a wide range of productions.

The repertoire of modes is not fixed, and in practice many documentary makers blend more than one. Other modes that can be employed include the reflexive, which foregrounds the processes involved in production, and the performative, where the documentary maker features on screen as a character or central protagonist. Examples of these include Michael Rubbo’s *Waiting for Fidel* (1974), *Cane Toads: An Unnatural History* (Mark Lewis, 1987) and John Safran’s documentary series *John Safran vs God* (2004).43
Cultural projects of documentary: Who makes documentaries?

British media scholar John Corner has identified some distinct ‘cultural projects’ of documentary. By cultural project, Corner means a way of functioning that develops in a particular institutional or cultural environment – such as broadcast television journalism – so that participants recognisable share ideas and aesthetic forms, production and distribution arrangements, and ways of engaging with audiences. Projects identified by Corner include:

- Democratic civics – the ‘publicity for citizenship’ produced under official (often governmental) sponsorship that is often associated with the pioneering documentary advocacy of John Grierson. Grierson argued that an effective democracy depended on its citizens being well informed, and famously proclaimed ‘I look on cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist.’ The SBS series Immigration Nation (2010) is a recent example of this cultural project.

- Journalistic inquiry and exposition – this is documentary as sustained investigative reporting and is particularly associated with the television industry and the development of broadcast journalism. It frequently features a mix of on-screen reporter and voiceover. An influential Australian example of this type of investigative documentary is the ABC TV program Four Corners.

- Radical interrogation and alternative perspective – independent documentary makers seeking to provide a criticism and correction of official or institutional accounts already in circulation have been at the forefront of developing this form. Such practitioners often adopt an experimental formal approach to their productions. The careers of many Australian directors, such as Tom Zubrycki and David Bradbury, are grounded in this approach. Examples include The Diplomat (Zubrycki, 1999) and My Asian Heart (Bradbury, 2009).

- Documentary as diversion – this is often called reality TV and includes a wide variety of factual entertainment that may range from Big Brother–style game-show formats to challenging series such as Go Back to Where You Came From (2011 & 2012).

After checking the fences

At the turn of the millennium, the increasing dominance of reality TV – where the most pressing questions threatened to be ‘who’s going to lose the most weight?’ or ‘who’s going to cook the best soufflé?’ – saw John Corner proposing that we might be entering a ‘post-documentary’ culture where diversion dominates. In Australia, some in the documentary community expressed concern that the rise of factual entertainments would displace the social documentary from the television schedule, thereby putting at risk the qualities of complexity, depth, cultural specificity and a questioning stance that have long been associated with the documentary form.

In Australia, some in the documentary community expressed concern that the rise of factual entertainments would displace the social documentary from the television schedule, thereby putting at risk the qualities of complexity, depth, cultural specificity and a questioning stance that have long been associated with the documentary form.
He recommended that rather than pose the question ‘Is this film a documentary?’ we should instead ask ‘Is this a documentary project?’ The latter approach, he suggested, would pay attention to the practice and purpose of a documentary production and not fetishise a fixed textual format.47

In 2007 Michael Cordell, executive producer of the series Go Back to Where You Came From, sounded a similar note when he urged his peers to

Let any idea about real people in the real world be based on its merits and relevance, not some arcane idea that one is, by definition, more ‘creative’, ‘worthy’ or ‘cultural’ than the other. There are gems and dross in all.48

Based on the response to Go Back to Where You Came From when it aired on SBS over three consecutive evenings in World Refugee Week 2011, Cordell was on the money. The series followed six carefully selected ‘typical’ Australians who had agreed to participate in a structured 25-day journey designed to challenge their ideas and feelings about refugees and asylum seekers. The use of our critical toolkit enables us to position Go Back to Where You Came From as an example of an emerging form of a reality TV–style documentary – one willing to move beyond a self-contained, diverting game-show scenario to engage with pressing debates in the public sphere.49 There has since been a second series of Go Back to Where You Came From. Other recent documentary series such as Making Australia Happy (2010) have also employed elements familiar to us from reality TV. These developments, together with the daily broadcast schedule, the proliferation of dedicated factual channels, the online documentary phenomena, and our cinema and festival screens, all confirm not only the continuity and variety of the documentary project but also the importance of developing a vocabulary for its analysis.

This article has been refereed.

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Endnotes

3 Trbic, op. cit.
5 Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA), ‘Documentary
10 ibid.
11 ibid.
12 ibid.
14 Australian Broadcasting Authority, op. cit.
17 John Corner, ‘What Can We Say About “Documentary”?’, op. cit.
19 Australian Broadcasting Authority, op. cit.
21 Richard Kilborn, op. cit., p. 5.
22 ibid.
23 FitzSimons et al., op. cit., p. 242.
31 Bill Nichols, op. cit.
34 Michael Rabiger, op. cit., p. 260.
40 Hardy, op. cit., p. 11.