

NUEVAS CONVERSACIONES SOBRE CINE DOCUMENTAL (VI):
TABITHA JACKSON

By Ricard Mamblona



Tabitha Jackson es Programadora de contenidos culturales de Channel 4 y editora de More 4, canal especializado en documentales creativos. La entrevista a esta gran especialista fue realizada el 15 de diciembre de 2009.

Could you please introduce yourself and let us know what the role of More 4 at Channel 4 is?

My name's Tabitha Jackson and I'm the editor of More 4, which is Channel 4's digital channel. Channel 4 has a portfolio of channels, like most terrestrial broadcasters

have now. So there's Channel 4, the main channel, there's E4, which deals with youth (16-34), and there's More 4, which is the upmarket (we sell ABC1 to advertisers) and we show a mixture of Channel 4 programmes but also things like international documentaries. I have a strand called *True Stories* which is international feature length documentaries, and we do arts on More 4, so people call it "the thinking man's Channel 4".

What do you think are the main factors that have contributed to the evolution of what we can call the new documentary film? Do you think that digital devices are the most important reason for this new wave of documentary films?

Yes I do. I think that since I've been in television. I came into television in 1994, as a filmmaker, and it was just as people were starting to get smaller digital cameras. It meant that you could be sent out relatively inexperienced to operate a camera or to do the sound. And that had good effects and bad effects. The good effects were that you, as a filmmaker, had to learn how to frame shots, how to shoot for the edit, you learnt about sound; the bad thing was that we would all shoot far too much and then the editors would be overwhelmed with material, so there's a lack of discipline there.

And I think that, in terms of television, clearly as everybody's budgets have got smaller, with this relatively inexpensive democratic form of filmmaking you can shoot what are effectively dramas, which are family life – you just keep shooting and then you make your story in the edit, and you put in the dramatic beats, the tension and so on -. And so there's a lot more of that stuff around on television.

I think in my area, which is feature length documentaries, the personal film has become much more common, and it's also the kind of film which most filmmakers coming out of film school make as their first film, because if you make a personal film you've got the equipment with you, you can edit it in your bedroom, you've got your set-up without having to leave your house. So lots of people are just turning the cameras back in on themselves and I think that has led to a certain self-indulgence and a narrowness of vision in terms of lots of documentaries that I'm presented with.

People who make amazing personal films, they're still amazing. Good personal films are still very good, but there's just more that are mediocre or they don't have a universal resonance. They don't look outwards to the

bigger thing, they look inwards and I think that's a danger. The other side of it though is that filmmakers with less money are able to go off to remote parts of the world and film places you would never get to before. Before, you'd have to think about taking a camera, a camera assistant, a sound man, someone to log the rushes and that would completely change who was making the films.

So I think there's also now a diversity of attitude and a diversity of voices coming from within the films because different people are able to make them. It's still the case I think that documentaries, especially the kind that I do, which take three or five years to get the money for, and filmmakers have to go round the festivals asking for money, no-one makes a profit out of them. People often go into debt on them. So it means that either you have really poor, impoverished filmmakers or you have people with trust funds and you have a private income from somewhere else making these films, you look on the credits and there's often a Rothschild or a DeBeers or these huge names and you think, "That's how they could afford to make that film."

Is there really a tendency towards subjectivity in documentary?

I've noticed that there are more personal films around. And now I think there's a new trend – well, it's almost becoming a cliché in documentaries where now –. Those small "flip-cameras", where it's just one button and you can shoot in HD... So now there's a device where within your film you give some people their own cameras and then they shoot material, and it can be incredibly exhilarating – suddenly it's their unmediated voice coming through, your character's unmediated voice within the film –.

But also, so often in the film there's a sequence where they are given their own cameras and sent off to do it. So it's that period where everyone's talking about the technology rather than the content. They get so excited by the technology. And I think to some extent that's the case with the bigger changes going on about which platform it's going on, is this a television documentary or is it going to be on a mobile phone or is it going to be on an MP3 player or whatever, and you think "Well, I don't really care – What's the story? Who are you characters? What are you saying?" And for me, if you've got those things nailed down it doesn't matter if your screen is big or small. And it doesn't matter how big your camera is. You're telling a story.

How could the technology affect the content?

I know I sound a bit negative about the technology and I don't mean to because I think we are seeing things that we've never seen before. It sounds like a contradiction, but we're seeing things that we've never seen before in television because they're so intimate and personal that they happen in all our lives but you never expect to see them up there, played out like huge dramas. And I think that if you're wrapped up in a story and someone can pick up a camera as soon as something interesting is about to happen and can capture that moment, it's incredible – it's an amazing privilege.



But still the dramaturgy and the ability to tell a story properly become important when you're faced with this mountain of material. So I think the important thing is still to know what you're trying to say about the world in your films. And if you can get to it, if you can use these very small stories to tell a bigger point, then the technology is fantastic for that and enables lots of different filmmakers to tell their story. If it's just a matter of filling the schedules with stuff – here's a husband and wife arguing – that's the downside to it, I think.

Due to the cheapness and flexibility of digital equipment, there are many more productions and therefore they are less profitable economically. In that cases, do you think filmmakers also seek a “social profitability” and find other media for dissemination, such as the Internet?

Yes, I've just been really talking about cameras but yes, the Internet – the ability to choose your audience. You put your film up there and then your audience will find it out, instead of having to abide by the rules of a broadcaster, who wants a certain type of thing. You make the film you want to make and you put it out there, and people can come and get it, you're absolutely right.

And I think if you talk to most documentary filmmakers they'll say they started because they wanted to make a difference or change something. But people have something to say and it's often the case with commercial broadcasters that “Well, we don't necessarily want to be saying that thing”, so then people didn't have an outlet to speak. But now anyone can say whatever they want for thousands and thousands of people to watch it. So it's interesting.

But then what becomes more important, especially for a broadcaster, is to be seen as the editor of choice. So there's all this stuff out there... Where shall I go if I want quality and storytelling skills and objectivity and proper journalism? But at the moment the safest place, certainly in the UK, is still Channel 4 or the BBC, not finding films on the Internet yet. But that will change as well, I'm sure.

What is considered quality in a documentary? It is a question of aesthetics, language, or maybe breaking with the conventional values of documentary film?

It's more a question of aesthetics and language. I sit with the people who make documentaries for Channel 4 and the documentaries on the main channel – there's a strand called *Cutting Edge* –. They are 48 minutes long, they talk about contemporary Britain, they're made in a certain way, they would still say they're about quality as well... So, with my strand, I want documentaries that, the fact that they're longer, helps you to tell stories in a different way. And you watch them in a different way. Most of my films don't have narration on them, they don't have commentary, so you're interrogating images or you're watching images play out with nobody telling you what to think, what the significance is. And I think that's important.

But our films assume that the audience wants to watch the film for what it is and will have the patience to let it reveal itself whereas a terrestrial channel audience now has to assume that someone is sitting there watching it with their thumb hovering over the remote control and, as soon as they get bored, they'll see what's on somewhere else. So they have to be slightly more aggressive in their storytelling.



So does television impose some limitations on documentary filmmaking, compared with cinema or Festivals?

Well, I don't want to describe it as imposing limitations, but I think it's doing a different job. Television is set up to be a mass entertainment medium. And when I say entertainment I mean that broadly, even with the most serious of documentaries, you should be engaged and entertained in that way. But it's there to appeal to a broad range of people and it does a different job to the cinema, where you have to pay ten or twelve pounds and you go in and you watch it and you don't do anything else: you can't talk in the cinema, you can't get up and walk around, it's a shared experience, almost like a church, you're sitting there and watching this thing and you can get swept up by it.

Television's on in a corner of the room. You're doing the ironing or you're talking to your friend or you're walking around so it has to behave in a different way.

And so the films have to be made in a different way to recognise the audience. True stories and feature-length documentaries pretend that they're going to be watched in the cinema, and often are, and they don't get the big audiences that they would get – that the other documentaries on television get –. That's the same with *Storyville* on the BBC, which is again a set of feature length documentaries. That's on BBC4, again on a digital channel, at the edges of the main TV schedule, and that's where we are on Channel 4. And I kind of like that because it gives us the freedom – it's not about ratings – it gives us the freedom to say "Look, this is a film made by a filmmaker and this is what it would feel like if it didn't have to be a TV documentary". Most people who make documentaries for broadcasters don't refer to their films as "films", they call them "programmes" or "shows". They're different things.

Are the documentaries shown on Channel 4 shown because they were box office successes?

Some of them, yes. I just bought *The Cove*, I bought *A Waltz with Bashir*, we showed *Capturing the Friedmans*, *Super-size me...* Those were, but then I'm also doing ones that no-one will have ever heard of and will have been at a film festival once or twice but they don't have a big caché attached to them.

And the audience is good?

The highest audience ever for *True Stories* was 500,000 people. If you got 500,000 people on the main channel people would think it was a disaster. But for us that was fantastic. So we have different expectations. I think the difference for advertisers is that our audience is incredibly ABC1. So it's absolutely what they want to be buying as advertisers. And our audience has a certain intelligence, they're loyal and it's not about the ratings. However, I wouldn't commission a documentary that I thought "this is only going to appeal to very few people"

Even if you like it?

The thing is if I like it, I think lots of people are going to like it. So if lots of people, in our terms, are going to watch the film you think: "That's acceptable". Because it's managed to speak to a lot of people. If nobody tunes in you think: "That was a complete waste of time". For the filmmaker, for me, no-one knew it was there, what was that all about? If you have something to say you should be able to say it in a way that lots of people can appreciate it.

Is Channel 4 experimenting with the new technologies? I saw that on the platform on Internet you can watch documentaries on demand...

Yes. That's good, that's the "on-demand" thing that is popular in the UK. I think that Channel 4 are doing much more exciting things in terms of cross-platform initiatives and I'm not particularly the right person to talk about them but yes, they're creating ARGs – Alternate Reality Games – that you don't even know are Channel 4, but they somehow resonate with a programme or a film that's been on the Channel, and there'll be a game that kids come into it and only a long way into it do they realize that "Oh, it's like that Channel 4 thing", there are Iphone applications, etc.

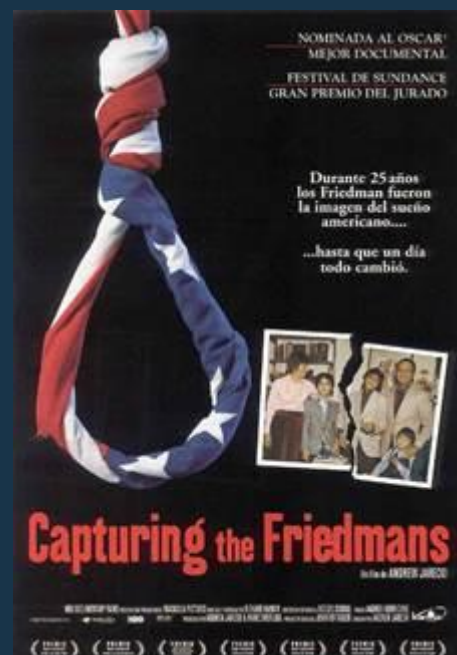
For example this sculpture outside, made up entirely of umbrellas, came out of a project called *Big Art*, which was about public art, so it was part of the online offering, the cross-platform offering. People could take pictures of their favourite bits of public art all across the country and then send them in – they could upload

their photos onto the site and they could rate other people's public art and it became a thing in itself, it became a conversation rather than us handing down something to an audience.

They were making their own media and creating something out of it. So there is a lot of that going on. And I think we need to get more people watching documentaries from a younger age and we need to get more people watching television from a younger age so it's finding a way of engaging them in a way that they are used to being engaged. By games, by interactivity, no longer can we sit in the corner of people's rooms and say: "Switch us on, we're really good," because there's too much other stuff going on out there.

Why are there so many new documentary Film Festivals emerging? Is there a hunger for documentary films?

The Festivals also emerge because of money. If you put on a film festival or a documentary festival you can get funded by different people and you can attract people to come into the town. And it's a virtuous circle of getting all the money in and getting focus on documentary. You might be right, but I'm not sure that it's purely a love of documentary which is enabling festivals to spring up around the place. Otherwise you'd think more people would be watching them on television as well.



Maybe you're right, I guess my vision was more romantic...

Also now, looking at how the festivals are going, even Sheffield, which used to be more people who get together who love documentary films and they watch them and drink too much and talk about them and that was it, is becoming more of a marketplace. So people are trying to raise funds for their documentaries coming up, and more and more commissioning editors are coming in. It also used to be a very local thing, just for the UK, and now people are coming in from Europe and from the United States and Japan and so it means it's still about the business.

And that's because in this country, unless you're making a programme for a broadcaster, how are you going to fund your documentary? It's such a new thing. As you know, historically filmmakers were always funded by the BBC. The BBC would say "we'd like you to make a film on this", and they'd give you the money and you'd go away and make the film. Then as the landscape fragmented and television broadcasters, BBC and Channel 4 wanted different things and they didn't want to make those films that documentary makers necessarily wanted to make. It meant that the documentary makers had no voice, they had no money because the money wasn't coming from the broadcasters. And it's only now that people are beginning to think properly about different ways of getting funded, whereas in America they never had that system, so it's always been a much more independent, entrepreneurial thing with grants and foundations and documentary filmmakers are used to spending years getting their funding together. It's a real shock for British filmmakers.

Do you think an award-winning documentary has a guarantee of being broadcast on television?

No. It helps a bit, but it doesn't. It doesn't because people watch documentary films in the cinema, which you do at festivals, in a different way from on television. So I've seen films that have won awards at film festivals that just wouldn't work on television because they don't hold the attention. There's not a narrative or

something that would work on a small screen. You watch them in different ways. And so it's quite difficult to find films that work well in both.

Having said that, part of my job is to acquire films. We commission and we co-produce but we also acquire films, and my job is to find the best films out there and a very good shortcut is to go to Sundance, Toronto or IDFA. And they're very useful in terms of being editors, in a way, and they've already selected down from the thousands of documentary films that were out there. So that's useful, but it's also dangerous because it can come down to three or four people's taste ultimately, which documentaries are talked about for an entire year, because they've decided that they are the ones that are going to be in their festival. So it can be dangerous.

And if you're interested in a documentary in a Festival, can you ask for the film to be re-cut for questions of length, rhythm, etc.?

Yes, we can. It's interesting because I think there are really only two places in the UK that take feature-length international films. There's us here on *True Stories* and there's *Storyville* on the BBC. Now *Storyville* traditionally are much more interventionist. They'll say: "We'd love to take your film but... it needs to be half an hour shorter, and we need to re-write the front of it, because...". Because it needs to "fit" on television. Whereas I kind of go the opposite way, and I'll say if it roughly works then I'll take it as it is and it will be an example of what you wouldn't normally get to see on television. This is a film without a pre-title, or without loads and loads of narration.



But that's just a historical thing that they've always tended to be more interventionist. Also they have more resources; they have more staff for their film so they can do that. But, in a way, I think that takes the fun out of the process slightly because then you end up with yet another television documentary instead of a film.

Do you think Reality TV is having an influence on authorship documentary and vice versa?

We know that our attention spans are shorter and in this country at least we are more needy of a narrative, telling a story, tell me what's going to happen next, what is this leading to? And the perception of these international documentaries, that they're so slow and don't necessarily go anywhere. European documentary is often accused of that, but I think that what consuming lots of reality TV does is to make you like a junkie: you need your next hit, your next dramatic beat. And so we have to find a way through that. I was thinking how long-form documentaries have influenced television – things like *Man on a Wire* or *Thin Blue Line* – suddenly you see these techniques cropping up on television which their influence tends to be more stylistic than narrative and editorial.

Even in films without a narrative commentary, and in a very cinematographic style, do you think there can be very televisual elements as well? I'm thinking about *Sons of Cuba*, or *Only When I Dance*, which I saw in Sheffield, and they reminded me of a talent contest like "X Factor"?

Actually that's a good example because one of our most successful documentaries in my strand is called *Afghan Star* and really what it's about it's the life in contemporary Afghanistan and particularly the life of women. But to get people to watch it it's based around the Afghanistan version of *Pop Idol* – so it's a competition. I mean, on Afghan television this competition is huge, and you have these characters and they have to sing and

you vote – an incredible use of democracy in Afghanistan, before the elections -. So yes, it was a very populist framework but a very intelligent basis. So yes, that is true, and that just keeps winning awards, it won the Prix Italia, it won the Sundance award, the Director's prize, and so even these theatrical very high quality panels love to go for something that's instantly immediate and accessible. "I get it," you think. "I get it." You want to know what happens at the end, who's going to win. And then I'll tape all that stuff about Afghanistan along the way.

I am thinking of *Spellbound* or, maybe some home footage of *Capturing the Friedmans* that reminds me of "Big Brother"?

Mad Hot Ballroom is another one. But now there's a slight fatigue with this. I was on a panel recently at IDFA and, as soon as you see a competition doc coming up like three characters who they have to overcome something you think: "I know this". It's too familiar now. It's not surprising any more. So we've gone through that period.

The competition doc – what makes this different from all the other competition docs around? The eco-doc... At the moment there are so many issues that people want to make films about, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they're good stories and for me what I'm looking for are good stories. Like the personal films, which you have to be careful of... You have to make sure it's a really good personal film.

There's also a tendency towards films from minority groups, like feminists, ecology, etc. I think they're important...

They are important. But bearing in mind that I commission for television even though I don't want them to be television programmes, I want them to be films. I'd have to think: on a Tuesday evening, which is when my strand goes out, when you get home from work, you open a bottle of wine, do you want to see another person telling you: "We're all going to die," "We've got to save the polar bears", "This is awful..." We kind of know this. I want to give people more of an escape. So if the very real facts about climate change are the context for a particular story, then I could go for it.

Is documentary ethics necessary?

Yes. Absolutely. The ethics of a filmmaker... if an interview has been twisted to fit a storyline then it's given up a claim to be truthful and I think that that undermines the foundation of a film. It seems such an obvious thing to me that the filmmaker has to be ethical and make the right choices, that there's not that much for me to say about it. They just have to be. And there are all kinds of regulations in this country. Our regulatory code is the strictest in the world in terms of fairness and privacy but it should be within a filmmaker. If they're trying to tell this bigger truth then they have to get to the bigger truth in a way that is truthful and fair and proper.

Can you give us any example in documentary where ethics were a bit troubled?

I think ethical questions are really interesting, particularly when you come up with creative ways of doing things. Herzog talks about "the ecstatic truth", so he would change details, ask people to do things, which we would think: "But that isn't what he normally does," so that means you can't use it, but Herzog talks about getting to the "ecstatic truth", which is the "bigger" bigger truth. So that's always an interesting argument.

And then there's a film that we co-produced called *Burma VJ*, and the film is astonishingly powerful and it's based on this video journalist who's smuggled out of Burma during the monks' uprising. But in order to tell that story the director reconstructs phone calls that took place, and he reconstructs them with the people who

were having the phone calls, so in that sense there's an authenticity about them, but they're not the actual phone calls. They are the phone calls re-done again, later. And it's a creative way of storytelling which the director of this is known for, and he makes no secret of it, it's just one of the ways in which he can tell this story. There's nothing inherently untruthful about it. These phone calls happened, they happened between these people, this is what was said. But for me, I still find it uncomfortable that you can come out of the film thinking that you've just listened to those phone calls. And you haven't. So I'm not saying there's a right or a wrong thing, but I think you have to constantly keep thinking "Where's the line?" and if we step over it, then there should be a transparency about the fact that we've done that.



When you categorize something as documentary, there's a kind of contract with the filmmaker and the viewer that this is going to be the truth...

Yes. That's exactly the point. I had a sense of discomfort when I first realized that those phone calls weren't the phone calls. Because the rest of the film is so utterly journalistic, you're seeing the video footage, the whole film is about these truthful images being got out. The terms of engagement with the audience is like a current affairs film, in a way, you just expect everything you're seeing to be the thing itself. And so I suppose there it's that contradiction between the precise truth and the bigger truth. The bigger truth is that those people made those phone calls, what's the problem? The precise truth is, but that's not what we're listening to.

But he does it to explain the story better.

Yes, but that doesn't mean it's ethical, just because what he's trying to do is a helpful thing. That's like the means justify the ends.

But in my opinion some spectators now probably don't care very much whether it's real or not real.

I disagree. There's a card at the beginning of the film saying that some of the events have been reconstructed.

I think that's actually more unhelpful, because then you're thinking, "Is that real?" So before we put it out we're going to make it very clear that it's the telephone calls that have been reconstructed for the purposes of drama. I think people do care. I think that if you were standing outside of the cinema and they all came out after watching *Burma VJ*, and you said: "Did you know some of that was reconstructed?", they'd say: "Yeah, of course, the bit with the camera in the bag, of course it was". "Did you know the phone calls were?"; "Were they?", and you can see that slight shift. And I don't want that reaction from the viewers.

I think the ethics of the filmmaker are crucial. It's finding... It's distilling, with all these different ways of expressing the bigger truth and different genres of documentary, that you need to find the distilled essence. And that has to do with the filmmaker and the filmmaker's ethics and it has to do with what you're trying to do when you make a documentary film or mobisode or game.

But I think my ideal would be that everybody had the discipline of being taught to shoot on film, and then were given the freedom of having a small camera and the ability to edit it. Because then you see the world in

ten-minute chunks and you're incredibly disciplined about when you pick the camera up and when you leave it, and I think they make the best films.

What is the sense or the essence of documentary?

A bigger truth. I think that's what I'd say. It's the bigger truth that there's news and current affairs, journalism which has to be concerned with the precise truth, and I think documentary is as rooted in reality but is concerned with the bigger truth, what does it say about us now, rather than what does it say about this specific thing. And there are different ways: within my strand I have strange hybrids of drama and documentary and very different ways of telling stories but they're all somehow about a bigger truth. You look at something and you think you know what it looks like, but then after you've seen the film you see it in a completely different way. So I think that's the sense of documentary.

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