

NUEVAS CONVERSACIONES SOBRE CINE DOCUMENTAL (y VII): BRIAN WINSTON

By Ricard Mamblona



Con esta entrevista cerramos la serie sobre el género documental, que realizó en Londres Ricard Mamblona, antes de defender su tesis doctoral. El encuentro con el profesor Brian Winston fue el 15 de enero de 2010.

What do you think are the main factors that have participated in the evolution of the new wave of documentaries and do you think that digitalization has something to do with it?

I don't see that much evidence of new kinds of documentary. I think there's a tendency to lose the disciplines of films in ways that don't necessarily improve the narrativity of the documentary. I think that the big thing that has

been really growing ever since the introduction of tape is that the cost of production has fallen but in an absolutely typical way, that hasn't meant an increase in efficiency.

As somebody once said there's no such thing as an "efficiency-saving machine". Because what happens is the task grows to fill the space you save by not having to do things like load the film and so on. So now people record appallingly long interviews, but they're still interviews. And I think that's true of everything. People will record enormous amounts of material so that the old disciplines we used to shoot 3:1, 4:1. It was the standard in the classic period. Maybe a bit longer but certainly not ridiculous. (Flaherty was alone in shooting absurd, 1000:1) When direct cinema was introduced and we got hand-held cameras, then people went up to 10:1 and you started to get maniacs like Wiseman who would go to 30:1 or 40:1. But basically now you get everybody working at 40:1 or 100:1 because nobody knows what they're doing.

And I've had real experience of that very recently working with an ex-BBC editor. I gave him a script, an old-fashioned script with frame references where it should be cut, and he's saying he needs five months; and I'm thinking three days. Now the three days is excessive to do it properly, that's newsreel hackery, but the fact is that the reason he's used to twenty-week editing schedules is because people shoot forever and then they come in and they wonder what film they've got. So of course it's down to the editor to actually work it out.

In Amsterdam this year, on the jury, we looked at a film and we didn't like it particularly and then we noticed in the festival newspaper that the filmmakers had said "Well, you go out and shoot things and then you work out what to do with it." Well the answer is, no you don't. And the only reason they can say such nonsense is because it doesn't cost anything. It's not costing us anything to record this. You couldn't think about doing this, even 8mm, how were you going to do this before the video? So I think there's been a laxness about that and that's true of shooting, true of editing...

In the film I'm making at the moment we were working with an experienced BBC guy; we're only shooting interviews, we don't need any great stuff, although I must say it's all beautiful. We interviewed Nick Broomfield for the film I'm making, and I had four things I wanted Nick to say and I knew exactly where it was going to fit in the movie and so we shot it. It took us twenty minutes and as we were walking away the guy said to me "That's a real pleasure, normally we spend hours." And I said "That's because people don't know what they're doing". So I think, for me, there's a sort of

certain lack of discipline which isn't the result of digital technology but is encouraged by it.

And it isn't even the result of video in the 70s coming in. It's bound up with the technological changes, but it's the technological changes of direct cinema that really do it. People think about happenstance, so with the first generation of direct cinema you get people waiting for things to happen so they can film them, etc. And then, that becomes interviews where people wait around and talk to people forever to see if they say anything of interest. And the discipline starts to erode and the structure erodes.

But it's true that the cheapness and flexibility of digital cameras helps not only to increase the numbers of productions but also democratizes public opinion?

No. I think that that's a theoretical position that is possible but it's rather difficult to prove. I mean, logically, it ought to be right, but I think there are a number of factors that make it more contentious than it seems. First of all, it's a truth discovered by the liberal democracies of Western Europe which eludes most governments, most authorities, and has for centuries, and it's this: if you try and stop people saying things, they'll say them. To use a Marcusean term, there's a sort of "prisonhouse of freedom".



The second thing is that looking for material is like looking for material in a haystack. It's not who produces, it's not proliferation of production, it's exhibition. I remember at one point I had a statistic: there were 50,000 rock and roll bands playing on one of the networks, Myspace or whatever, "so what?" you know, who knows? You can get lost. And finally they're not coming up with anything new. The fact that everyone can do it means there are a lot of people imitating mass communication forms. If you look at Youtube you can see that.

People ape mainstream media all the time. There's a code which they know they have to follow in order to communicate, but they don't know quite how the code works because they've only ever received it, they've never been taught how to do it. So the stuff is interminable and useless, quite a lot of it. Now occasionally people stumble out, but the answer is they would stumble out anyway. So I think that's all illusory, the notion of democratization is illusory.

The argument between Google and the Chinese government at the moment that we're speaking today (in January of 2010) that's absolutely typical, that's what's really going on. It's an illusion. And the proof of that is to do with all of the famous cases that people talk about. The Junta in Burma, everybody's taking photographs of their repression. But as long as you're selling them all to the Chinese you can take as many photographs as you like, you're not going to move them. You know, realpolitik is realpolitik. Don't confuse the possibility of that. That's not saying that it doesn't get eroded at the edges but the authority will move to control that. And I therefore don't believe that the technology itself is any sort of guarantor of increased ability.

And I suppose the final thing I would want to say about it is that I'm always reminded of a remark in a book by Alexander Werth as one of the first people to write about the Soviet Union in the 60s. I remember I read it when I was a kid, and he was talking to an official at the All Writers Union who said the number of writers had improved 25,000% between 1910 and 1960 and Werth's remark was "Yes, but in 1910, the writer was Tolstoy". In other words, you give people a pen but it doesn't mean to say they're going to write a great novel. It doesn't mean to say they're going to write the Communist Manifesto, it doesn't mean to say they're going to write the Declaration of Independence.

If you give them a camera, the same. They aren't going to make *Citizen Kane*. There's more going on than simply having the technology. That is the crucial thing. And it's an illusion to believe that giving people the technology is going to affect that. But this, of course, is not to say that you mustn't give the people the technology. Of course you must give the people the technology, that's a given, but you mustn't expect too much from it.

If you ask a commissioning editor or even a jury in a Festival "What are you looking for when you see a documentary?" they speak about "We're looking for high quality documentaries". What are high quality documentaries nowadays?

I think the issue of quality is a coded for ideological constraint. You have to understand that it's a suppressive notion and if you look at the history of the development of technical standards they're an expression of the same thing. The American Society of Motion Picture Engineers, the SMPE, now the SMPTE or whatever, was founded in 1915 to impose technical standards. It also started to build Hollywood as a mechanism of control. The BBC, faced with the first Portapak images in the late 70s; the BBC engineers announced that they were untransmittable. Of course they were transmittable. So that's the first level of control. The quality is the same. And the BBC have always used that.

It is very common, on the rare occasions when the BBC commission something that they then don't feel they can use: *War Games*, by Peter Watkins, for instance, the first level of control when you say "you're censoring this" and they say "how dare you? We are impeccable liberals, we don't censor things. No, it's not very well made. It doesn't meet the standard. It isn't of sufficiently high quality." So quality is code for censorship.

And I've written at length about how the argument of quality - technical quality. In the thirties, Grierson's argument with the people to his left, with Ivor Montagu and the Workers' Film and Photo League people, was always about quality. And Grierson wouldn't use 16mm. Why wouldn't he use 16mm, if he was trying to reach people outside the mainstream cinemas? 16mm was there, you could do things a lot easier, but then he wouldn't be a professional, he wouldn't meet quality.

And people on the left also believed quality, and certainly there is a moment when quality becomes important. It's the same as language. If the quality is so appalling, if the film is so ill-exposed and badly put together that you don't know what's going on, then obviously there's a quality issue. But if you can see it and understand it, there's no quality issue. And to claim there's a quality issue is actually to censor. It is actually to give you a censoring tool.

So I don't hold with the notion of quality being very substantive. And when people on juries tell you they're looking for quality, that's, I think, fairly meaningless. My experience of juries is that people are looking for something new, certainly. They want to be told something they haven't seen before. That's a real problem. And they want it to be well executed so they can understand it.

And indeed, it's not a question of meeting a threshold of quality, it's a question of doing things that will carry things a stage further. There's a Spanish documentary which did very well in Amsterdam with my jury, about a spy, a double agent in the Second World War, which constantly cross cuts interviews with experts, the history of this guy, with feature films of the time about people spying. It's wonderful, it adds a whole dimension.

I guess you're referring to *Garbo. El Espía*, by Edmon Roch...

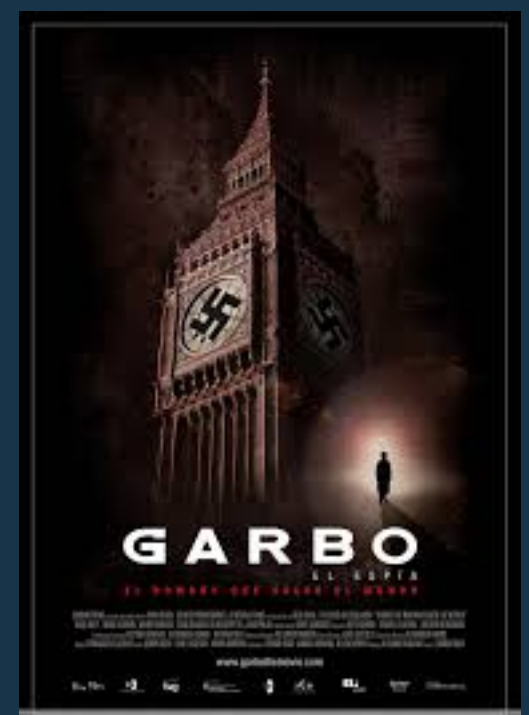
Exactly. And we all liked it, because we looked at it and we said: "That's clever." So when you say quality, my experience is that people want things to be clever. They expect a certain level. The film that won (*Last train home*, by Lixin Fan) is beautifully made, there's no question about it, but it's also the humanity of the thing. It wasn't the outstanding quality of it, in a technical or a real sense, it was very well thought out, it was humanistic, it dealt with a real issue. *Garbo* was shortlisted, and this other film won. And it was a really nice film. And you could turn around and say "but it's of very high quality", but that's meaningless.

Do you think that the new documentaries have a trend towards subjectivity and individualism?

I don't think there's a trend. If there is a trend towards the autobiographical it's been going on for forty years. I mean, it started with *Sherman's March*. It gets easier, this equipment really makes the personal film easier, and I think there is a certain tendency to make autobiographical films as people now have the wherewithal in a way that they didn't. You'd have to be Stan Brakhage or even Ed Pincus and the guys in Boston who started doing personal things, but that is a reflection of the way in which society was going.

I've always related those films to the rise of the "me" generation which had nothing to do with filmmaking, it was to do with the changing and indeed increasing dominance of the individual in American society. And people started making autobiographical film and so on and so forth. I don't think there's a trend, therefore, I think it's there. I think also all of the traditional forms of documentary, the Griersonian repertoire of filmmaking is there.

I think that there are a number of new developments under way which have recovered the possibility of documentary outside of the observational which has dominated the Anglo-Saxon documentary enormously, more than continental European documentary. We were in the grip of the enchanter: The observational fly-on-the-wall direct cinema enchanter, to the point where people to this day believe



that unless you do that, unless its observational with no commentary etc., then it isn't a real documentary.

For instance, the paper I'm about to give here, Lanzmann, I dismiss it, a footnote, Lanzmann says "Oh, it's not a documentary because I re-enacted things", and I've said this need not detain us if we remember *Nanook of the North*. It's ridiculous. You announce that something is not a documentary because you don't know what a documentary is. So I think since the mid 80s with films like *The Thin Blue Line* and Michael Moore's first film, people have been recovering a whole range of possible expression and the traditions which direct cinema totally blotted out for a quarter of a century, in the Anglo-Saxon documentary especially. It's true to a certain extent elsewhere but particularly in the Anglo-Saxon documentary. And I think that what we've been having now since the hegemony of the observational started to get eroded in the 80s we've had an increasing pace of varieties of forms, which I find extremely interesting. Animated documentary, for instance, I think is really interesting or Brian Hill's experiments with musicals.

I wrote ten years ago that I thought the crucial element was witness. So either you witness it as the filmmaker, it's your witness as a filmmaker, which is one observation on camera, or you film people who have witnessed, who bear testimony, in various ways. Then, once you start bearing testimony, then you can reconstruct against that witness and then it doesn't matter how you reconstruct, and maybe there are some subjects where the appropriate way to reconstruct is to use animation, or to get people to distil their life stories into a song, it doesn't matter. Once you've accepted that the issue is prior witness then you're OK.

And I've discovered making this feature film that I'm making about Robert Flaherty that the received opinion about Robert Flaherty, and I've said this myself, and I've never questioned it, is that he just dreamt up all of the incidents in *Nanook*, with the help of Allakarialak, and he wasn't remembering what he actually did but what his father did. So therefore it's a generation out of date, it's all invented, and the incidents are typical but they're not grounded. I'd never done any original research on it, I spent two minutes in the Flaherty papers and some published stuff and I'd started putting things together, because if you're working on a subject you do, and I'm working on a film. And it's amazing that he met a guy in 1912 who had spent ten years totally isolated, with his family, collecting driftwood and one thing and another to make himself a canoe, an *umiak*, to get back to civilization because he'd gone out hunting and the ice had split in the night and everything had drifted away. And the incidents are in an account Flaherty published of this guy's adventures, he's called Comuk, in 1915, whenever Flaherty published the account, and the incidents are exactly reconstructed in *Nanook*. There is prior witness. The walrus hunt, he got that from another guy from Homaraluk. So we were wrong about that.

It is witnessed stuff, very often. And I think the prior witness thing means that if you've got prior witness then it doesn't matter how you illustrate it. And there's more to documentary than the mere observational. And I think that's the trend, that there's a diversity of expression, and when you finally add onto that the possibility of CGI, which I think has only been barely touched at this point, I proposed and nearly got approved. Actually, a long time ago, ten or fifteen years ago, and the technology wasn't really there to do it in any viable way, but I proposed a series which would use digital technology to animate visual material from the past.

So there's this moment in 1895 when the world moves, that the most amazing example of that of course is a wonderful little film called *Locomotion* which is a history of the steam engine, but it's all stills, what we used to call action stills, moving the camera relative to the still images. And then suddenly it's 1895 and there's a steam train moving... So in 1895 the world moves. But in fact you can move the engravings.

Milton, who famously said "as well burn a man as burn a good book". Well, his death's head is in Westminster. You could make him say that very easily. And, in fact, I wrote a little script as part of a pitch document which was about an incident in the early 19th century called Peterloo, where a crowd of workers was attacked by a militia in St. Peter's Square in Manchester, in 1819, and there are wonderful engravings on it and there's an eye-witness account and you could get all those things to move, the hussars with their sabres, of course you could. So we haven't even started to scratch the surface of the possibility of CGI in the documentary, it seems to me.

We're talking about an animated documentary, that means something that we can create without shooting, but that doesn't mean that it's not a documentary. That means that technology is a help for documentary?

I agree. No question about it.

So that means that it's something that's based on the ethics of the documentary filmmaker?

Exactly. But I'm not saying that anybody can do it. That's the point. It's still a question of having something to say, of obeying narrative norms etc. Doing all the things you need to do in order to

communicate appropriately, which doesn't come necessarily that easily to everybody. Because it's an artificial form, it has to be learned. And people are either more or less skilled at doing it, so people can talk, but some people are more persuasive than others. So if you give people cameras and some people use cameras better than others, and some people use these digital technologies better than others...

But the mode of communication has to be conservative. Language has a dynamic but is inherently conservative because if it isn't it won't work. People have to understand each other, which means they have to share something that's been previously agreed. And it's the same with visual language. So that if you're making a film there are certain assumptions. You can play with it, you move it, you push it, but you can't abandon it. That's the avant-garde. It's a definition of the avant-garde. They're constantly trying to abandon the agreed language. And that's one of the ways in which the agreed language advances and lives and grows, I have no problem about that. But it's also why the avant-garde isn't a mass medium, by definition, whatever art it's in.

So that's what I think happens. People can do these things with digital but the example I've just described to you is actually professional thinking. It's me as a professional, not me as an average Joe, it's me as a filmmaker thinking here's a possibility, let's come. But if I'm not a filmmaker, how do I start?

It's a problem sometimes to categorize films. So when we categorize documentaries, does it mean that there's an agreement between the viewer and the filmmaker that what we are going to see is truth?

You're very right to actually involve the audience in the deal. I think one of the mistakes made in the classical definition of documentary is it assumes the camera will give you a truth, or whatever. Whereas in fact it's a deal. Reception theory makes that quite clear, it's a deal between the viewer and the screen. And the viewer has to understand what the protocols of documentary are. The problem is, Noel Cowell says "People understand the protocols." No, because the protocols can be easily subverted. You can fool people all the time. So I think he's wrong about that. But he's right about the notion of protocols. They're not a guarantee of the truth, of course.

Now the point, I think, is that within the normative protocols there are ways of defining documentary. My latest thing is to take Ricky Leacock's definition and add the audience element to it. Because Ricky said, "It's some aspects of reality captured by me while I was there", so that's what I'm saying: "It's some aspects of recorder reality, interpreted by the audience as a truth of some kind, or as having an elevated truthful relationship with the pre-existing reality". That way you actually remove the onus of authenticity from the filmmaker and put it on the audience to accept or reject as they will. And I'm much happier with that.

Why is the number of documentary Film Festivals increasing? Is it because there is a large number of productions, or because the genre of documentary is in fashion, or because the festival is the only place where you can see this kind of films?

Certainly the last is true, and I think there is a fashionable thing going on and people are looking for documentary, and I think in a sense it's true that people are making more documentaries because the equipment and everything else is cheaper. The fact is that they're not actually coming up with new forms, and if you look at documentaries you see things now which used to be very rare have become absolute commonplaces so that they become self-indulgent.



I'm thinking of "the film about why we couldn't make the film". Now when Michael Rubbo goes *Waiting for Fidel* forty years ago, that's really interesting. When Jill Godmilow makes *Far From Poland*, it's really interesting. But when some clown who hasn't done his research gets kicked in the teeth because he hasn't done his research, that's not very interesting - that's just stupid. And you see an awful lot of that and I think that there is a trend to that.

And indeed documentaries are at the moment popular, whether they'll remain so or not I don't know. They're not as popular as people suspect. They still haven't reappeared on network television, for instance. Michael Moore's the only one who really makes money. Nobody else makes any money. If you look at the Variety gross figures you get a few documentaries right down at the bottom. So they're not that popular, it's just that nobody watched them at all, so if one person watches them that's a 100% increase.

So we can't speak about economic profitability when it comes to documentary...

When you get to actually making mainstream films and you're going onto the television it isn't that cheap. This is completely illusory. There are all sorts of things. If you look at the major feature

documentaries we've been having about, say, ecological subjects, with one thing and another they all cost a fortune. *End of the Line*, for instance, Rupert Murray's latest movie, that's a nice few-hundred-thousand or half-a-million-pound production. The film I'm making is a third of a million euros. Try and go near an archive, they charge you twelve thousand dollars a minute. It's illusionary, this. Capitalism isn't disappearing because Sony have made a little camera that you can make a film on.

In UK seems the word "documentary" is not a problem at all, when you are using the term to call other sub-genres like "drama-documentary", "docudrama", "docugames" etc., whereas in Spain, and other countries, we are trying to avoid this word, using expressions like "non-fiction", "*cinéma du réel*", etc.

That's really silly. It's a representation, it's not the real. If you can't tell the difference between looking at a photograph of an earthquake and being in an earthquake there's something seriously wrong with you. There's a profound difference about that, it's nothing to do with the real. It's no more to do with the real than a fiction film. I mean, Tom Cruise is a real person. So when he pretends to be somebody else, that's real, it's a real pretence.

Calling on the "real" in defining the documentary film is to ignore that what you're really talking about is a relationship to reality. And that the claim is being made about the relationship to reality being different from the relationship to reality in fiction. So I actually don't mind non-fiction so much but I would object to that because that implies that a number of fictive elements, like narrative, are being abandoned, when in fact they're not because they're necessary to communication.

So I think the fact that we use documentary specifically is actually, despite the difficulties of defining it, a good idea. And the reason we have a difficulty in defining it in Anglo-saxon terms is really Grierson's fault because Grierson looked at Flaherty and declared that was documentary. And then, when Grierson decided to make totally different films with totally different ambitions for public education purposes, rather than travelogues, he said: "Well these are also documentaries". Because Flaherty had gained such a huge reputation he hitched his wagon to that. And he knew damn well the two things were totally different. And this insight is obvious when you hear it, I think, but I didn't realize that. That was told to me by a guy called Dennis Foreman, who was head of the BFI in the fifties and he invited Flaherty - he was the last person to invite Flaherty to Britain just before he died -. Dennis said that it's Grierson's fault - he knew Grierson very well, of course -. He said Grierson knew very well these two films were different but he put them together because it would help the PR. And we struggled with the consequences of not knowing what documentary is.



Having this endless debate about its definition as a result of trying to yoke these two things together but the fact of the matter is its some aspects of reality as recorded and processed for the consumption of an audience. It's a narrative. That's what it is, and there's no problem about that. But it has as much or as little to do with the real as any other sort of realist image.

Do you think that Reality TV is having some influence on the so-called authorship documentaries?

Yes, I think so. But then reality TV depends on an assumption of the real. I mean, Grierson would not acknowledge reality television as having anything to do with the real. Because it doesn't involve prior witness. What the camera operator, the cameras are witnessing in reality television is entirely the consequence of decisions made by the producers of the programme. Well, what's that got to do with reality? It's disappeared up it's own arse as far as that argument goes.



When Grierson is reconstructing, he's reconstructing things he's witnessed, or he's listening to people and they're telling him things that have happened and he's reconstructing them. There's always some reality somewhere. So that when you look at the classic collection of 1930's films there are actually some that are over the line, like *The Saving of Bill Blewitt*, which is classed as a documentary because it involves non-actors and it was made by the documentary film movement, but it's not documentary at all, it's a completely faked advertising film, selling the services of the Post Office savings bank. It has nothing to do with any reality at all. So that is just a fictional film, but most of the others actually recount -

reconstruct material that they've actually heard or seen or witnessed -. And then, when you get observational cinema you do witness those things.

But they're things that were happening whether you were there or not. As Ricky Leacock says: "Let the event be more important than the filming". Well, in reality television there is no event. The event

is created by the producers therefore it's worthless. Now John Dovey would tell you: "Oh no, it's useful, it's a simulation", but I think he's got that wrong.

What is the essence of documentary?

Well, I think it's prior witness. It's the notion of testimony. It's a testimony of something that relates to the real world, rather than to the imagination of creators. Fiction starts in the mind of the creator. Documentary starts in the real world in some way, and then it's processed through various minds but those minds are constrained by that initial start point in the real world. That is the essence for me.

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ISSN 2014-668X | Latindex

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