Approaches to Creative Actuality:

Documentary Pedagogy in the Contemporary University Environment

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Whether working with undergraduate students of documentary as filmmakers, media historians and/or archivists; supervising postgraduate researchers who are analyzing and producing documentary with the purpose of social investigation and transformation; or including a range of students in staff-led documentary projects with high impact as research, documentary within the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of East Anglia (UEA) has a central place within the curriculum and as an option for inquiry and practice. Bill Nichols contends that "documentary flourishes when it gains a voice of its own, when it speaks to us about the world we share" (2017, 91). Taking this notion of the vocal and the dialogic in a shared cultural context, we offer a reflective piece that will explain the comprehensive approach we currently utilize in documentary pedagogy at UEA. The Covid-19 pandemic challenged our models of active learning and authentic assessment, but the adaptation of our practice succeeded in retaining the core principles of our documentary pedagogy. This enabled one of the classic definitions of documentary form—namely, that it is the "creative treatment of actuality" (John Grierson, 1933)—to be fulfilled as a creative *response to* actuality in a year rich in adaptability and attainment.

The authors are Professors at UEA and over the last five years have both convened the second year undergraduate creative-critical module on documentary and have co-supervised over ten PhD students. In what follows we discuss two aspects of our pedagogic approach to creative actuality: the teaching of documentary and the frequent tensions between theoretical

perspectives and vocational contexts; the co-supervision of PhD students who are producing documentaries and the strategies we have employed to provide best-practice in supervision.

There can often be a tension in the context of higher education when it comes to the creative-critical practice of documentary production. Students might strive to produce the "best film possible" because they believe in a cause, have a creative idea or may even harbor vocational aspirations. The aesthetics and the formal aspects of documentary are a valuable part of pedagogy. In addition, making a film as a utilitarian exercise is useful in teaching. As in all creative-critical work in a form that is growing in appeal and uptake, the relationship between theory and practice must be paramount. To this end, whether we are working with undergraduates who are exploring documentary for the first time or experienced practitioners who are making documentaries as part of their PhD, we must always ask the fundamental questions of *what is documentary* and *why does one make a documentary?*

Attending professional training—such as that offered by Raindance Film School (an international, accredited film school based in London, which offers courses by industry practitioners on independent filmmaking, directing, cinematography, project management, etc.)— can be surprising for an academic in the way it deploys an ethos and methodology of pedagogy that gives scant attention to theoretical perspectives and critical self-reflection. A vocational course typically encourages its students to "be creative" and produce "entertainment." But at a university, creative-critical work in documentary needs to be underpinned by research and theory. We generally encourage students to think about research questions from the get-go, and the focus for the practice of making a documentary therefore becomes *how do you answer a theoretical question through a documentary*? Consequently, we might find that PhD students who have a background in professional filmmaking but

require to be encouraged to explore theoretical questions and critical approaches need to let go of the reliance upon, and security of, vocational skills and finding mechanisms for objective criticality. There can be a tension between the vocational perspective of "be entertaining" creativity and the rigor of inquiry and academic purpose in producing a creative output.

This raises an ethical question which we are obliged to face. Frequently, when we are exploring the theory of documentary as a creative form, we need to foreground discursive questions around authenticity, fact, and truth. In other words, how far can or should we trust *any* documentary? For example, one undergraduate produced an outstanding short documentary about the trees of Norwich which was presented as though it was a single walk through the city on one specific day. Of course, it was filmed over several weeks, but that was not relevant, yet analysing time, structure, montage and editing would have been useful in deconstructive analysis. The key question is about time and representation of authenticity. What becomes *not* important?

On our MA in Film, TV and Creative Practice degree, students have to produce an audio-visual artifact as a response to research questions, and they can find it confusing. We encourage them to focus on documentary making methods and critically reflect on those rather than the content of films that they choose. A case in point is that one of them produced a highly emotive documentary about post-natal depression. For their critical reflection, however, they wrote about post-natal depression and did not get a good mark because we wanted the student to focus really on what was going on with their filming style, the kind of documentary they have chosen, why, and so on. So, keeping students contained within the parameters of research does not always give you the best answers.

We have had experiences of PhD students making fundamental decisions in regard to the construction and adaptation of their creative practice work, which has impacted diverse aspects from context to content, from style to narrative. We have witnessed the journey of our students who have, as it were, made original interventions into their own initial concepts and aims. For example, one student aimed to create a fiction film but ultimately changed direction and developed a documentary about the process of working with the actors in general. He realised that a distinctive doctoral inquiry was emerging around process and preparation and not the final product. In this case, a documentary was key to offering a major contribution to knowledge: the fiction film will be a postdoctoral endeavour. Creating a documentary was a shrewd move as it could explore questions of process, ensemble, and psychological journeys in depth. In other words, what lies beneath the surface can reveal unexpected and idiosyncratic moments as much as paradigmatic methods, and a documentary could capture this in a rigorous and distinctive manner.

Supervising students can encompass more than guiding their research inquiry and creative practice. We increasingly encourage our supervisees to think about engagement with the public and/or the media in order to promote their work. Throughout their degree and beyond, we strive to promote and help disseminate the work that they are producing with an outward-looking approach. We encourage the students to think about their creative-critical work beyond academic terms. When they graduate, we are still there to supervise them and support them on their subsequent journey. In line with our university's social change and academic activism agenda, we also encourage all our students to think about social issues and how they might impact on, and contribute to, social change. Indeed, this, at times, offered us the opportunity to work with students as partners in a range of projects. A case in point is

Eylem's 2016 documentary *Growing Up Married*, a zero-budget film about child marriage and its effects on women's lives. As a film co-created with students who volunteered to be part of the project, the documentary changed the law in the UK in 2021 by influencing debates around the Child Marriage Bill as the documentary was screened at the House of Lords and House of Commons as part of briefings to policymakers. The editor, assistant director, and assistant producer of this documentary were all our students undertaking MA and PhD level research on a range of topics, but they benefitted from the journey the film had taken as they have been part of the dissemination process. This remains a strong example in the context of working with students as partners. This kind of collaboration allows a two-way conversation in which we learn from students as they contribute to our projects. Indeed, it was our students who taught us how to do subtitling and editing in the process of making this film.

With every PhD supervision comes a sense of responsibility. At times students focus on sensitive subjects in their documentaries. It is our ethical duty to support our students in challenging circumstances. This can be as basic as discussing the implications of making a mockumentary with topics that allude to the coronavirus pandemic or deliberately exploit "fake news": playful, humorous and satirical yet robust and responsible. In regard to PhD students, a case in point is an Egyptian student whose documentary and research focuses on the representations of gay characters in Egyptian cinema. The student is himself gay and this project could have been a powerful auto-ethnographic study but given the taboo nature of the subject within Egyptian culture and as a result of ongoing political tensions alongside censorship-related constraints, the student decided to bring to the forefront of his methodology a historical approach. Consequently, we had to work with him to navigate the challenges around censorship in its legal and ethical context. Critically, the concept of

censorship in Egyptian cinema is quite a different thing when it comes to creative practice and we explored, at length, how the student might conduct his research responsibly and securely.

A similar issue emerged with another PhD student, who interviewed a number of journalists and documentarians in the Middle East about secularism. Again, it is a topic fraught with issues such as censorship, blasphemy and illegality. For the student, he needed to consider who would watch his documentary – perhaps even *why* – and how it might subsequently be viewed and used. Vitally, he needed to consider the potential impact for his interviewees (a factor the UEA ethics process is designed to cover). We want our students to do the strongest research as possible, but we also have a duty of safeguarding their activity within research contexts. Sometimes a student's identity is brought into sharp relief: one PhD student produced a feature-length documentary about contemporary refugees and migration. In discussing her work in contexts of outreach and dissemination, her own identity as a white European woman filmmaker occasionally became a central issue in debate and discussion in which she was challenged about her right and purpose in making a documentary about refugees who are principally non-white and non-European. In this context, her positionality as an academic filmmaker is an issue we encouraged her to reflect on critically in her written work.

Conclusion

In summary, we offer some key reflections. Although there can be perceived tension between academic and creative approaches to documentary filmmaking, this can, in fact, turn out to be a fruitful pedagogical approach as we encourage students to think creatively about responding to research questions with and through an audio-visual artefact. At the postgraduate level,

documentary practice serves as an effective method for research, and a crucial tool for the dissemination of research ideas and in generating impact through research. In this respect, we have a responsibility to encourage students (at postgraduate and even undergraduate levels) to consider the impact of their audio-visual outputs both within and outside academia, as documentary is a powerful digital storytelling method. Similarly, we have found that there is great value in collaborating with students as it offers them opportunities for active learning, and it allows us to set real-world assessments.[i] As we saw earlier, one of the leading scholars of documentary, Nichols, argues that documentary flourishes "when it speaks to us about the world we share." (2017, 91). We have found that in an academic context that encourages practice in its research and teaching, documentary does not merely speak to us about the world: it allows us to create and understand, to expose and discover.

Endnotes:

John Grierson, "The Documentary Producer,' *Cinema Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1933), 7–9.

Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (3rd Edition) (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017).

Eylem Atakav, *Growing Up Married* (2016)

[i] https://www.uea.ac.uk/thinking-without-borders#episode-words