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DOCUMENTARY AND TRUTH ON TELEVISION: THE CRISIS OF 1999

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Documentary is a slippery genre to define; classifications can be out of date before the printers' ink has dried. Acceptable documentary practice depends on a subtle three-sided process of negotiation. On one side are the habits and beliefs of audiences, what viewers will put up with or believe in. On another are the demands of cinema and television as media, how the film or programme will fit with current practices and expectations. On the third are the aspirations of film-makers and participants, cynical or idealistic, motivated to show, but also to hide.

Every genre is constructed and renewed through such a tripartite negotiation¹. But it is more fraught and fast-moving for documentary because the genre is based on a logical impossibility. Documentaries are constructs, yet they seek to reveal the real without mediation. Watching a documentary involves holding these two contrary beliefs at once, a process of disavowal² which is not terribly unusual in human behaviour, but is inherently unstable³. The documentary genre bases its claims on showing reality (rather than fiction), truth (rather than artifice), authenticity (rather than pretence). So the activity of both making and watching a

¹ See Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, routledge 2000 especially pp.7-47. Neale however totally omits the category of documentary from his exploration of genre, limiting himself to fiction only. The omission of documentary as a genre, logically distinct from all of fiction (rather than from particular genres of fiction) would disturb his basic categorisations. I have explored this question in John Ellis, 'A Minister is About to Resign: On the Interpretation of Television Footage' in ed. Anne Jerslev, *Realism and Reality in film and Media*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen 2002.

² Disavowal commonly means 'to deny knowledge of'. Freud points out that to deny knowledge of something is simultaneously to articulate the possibility (if not the fact) of its existence. See for instance his 'On Negation' (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works vol XIX, Hogarth Press 1963, pp.236-40). The term therefore becomes useful for describing the process of understanding the 'factuality' of documentary which we know not to be true even as we enjoy it as true.

³ This instability is easy to see in arguments about the status of documentary footage, which can provoking reactions such as "they must have faked that scene", "nobody would possibly allow themselves to be shown like that", "I've been there and it's nothing like that".

documentary involves reaching beyond the necessary fictionality and artifice that is any mediated representation, as well as reaching beyond the 'performance of self' in the artificial activity of filming to find the authentic self beyond. No wonder documentary constantly reinvents itself, both in its technologies (always striving to get 'closer to the real') and in its forms (always looking for the fresh way of doing things). So there is a constant renegotiation of the generic relationship. Filmmakers and institutions alike have to get people to believe enough in what documentaries are doing for the whole thing to work. All that matters is that belief is sufficient rather than absolute; indeed the process of disavowal makes that inevitable. For a documentary to work and to be worthwhile it is enough that its viewers can make sense of it as reality rather than as representation.

It is scarcely surprising that the whole thing sometimes goes wrong. So it was with British TV documentary in the early months of 1999. The mid-market tabloid newspaper the Daily Mail filled its front page on 5 February 1999 with the question 'CAN WE BELIEVE ANYTHING WE SEE ON TV? '. It was remarkable enough that a popular paper should pose a philosophical, indeed epistemological, question in its main headline. It was even more remarkable that it should, in common with other media, return to the question in subsequent weeks. It is equally remarkable that the whole affair was hardly remembered a few months later. Clearly this is a story of a crisis in the documentary genre which was subsequently repaired.

A clear light is often thrown onto obscure workings when something suddenly goes wrong. Taken for granted beliefs are revealed and re-examined. Such moments occur because many different factors come together in a moment of overdetermination which brings together factors of different duration, profundity, and importance. Hence it is important, before telling the story of the crisis of 1999, to understand the many factors that played into it.

THE GATHERING CRISIS

In mid-80's, documentary was seen as "an endangered species" on British TV. As Winston says "no documentary of any kind ...made it into the top 100 programmes of 1993"⁴. A rapid change in the nature of and status of the genre took place from that low point. This change has been examined variously by Stella Bruzzi, John Dovey and Brian Winston, and is often encapsulated as 'the rise of the docu-soap'⁵. Winston dates this from the popularity of the BBC's Vets' School in autumn 1996 and of Driving School in summer 1997⁶. The first signs of a new popular factual programming different in form and content from the earlier reality tv shows, such as the BBC's 999 (BBC 1992-), can be seen in the unexpected success of Animal Hospital week in August 1994⁷. By 31 Jan 1998 the Radio Times front cover featured three stars of the docusoap. 'Jeremy from Airport' in a dinner jacket next to 'Maureen from Driving School' and 'Trude from Vets in Practice' in sparkling evening gowns, all posed in a dramatic 'dance finale' gesture over a large gold caption 'Fame!' and subcaption "It happened to them. Could you be TV's next docu-soap star?"⁸.

The new docusoaps were distinguished both from conventional documentary output and form and from the 'emergency services' shows of the early 1990s by their extensive coverage of relatively mundane lives. Their subjects were newly-trained vets, people taking their driving tests, traffic wardens, hotel workers: ordinary people, often service industry workers, faced with particular challenges. Documentary seemed to have finally abandoned its practice of casting people as social problems, discovering instead the puzzling and conflict-ridden nature of everyday life. The replacement of the issue-driven with the slice-of-life documentary quickly brought accusations of 'dumbing down', especially when some of these featured individuals became stars for a time, with

⁴ Brian Winston, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries*, BFI, London 2000 p.54

⁵ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: a Critical Introduction*, Routledge, London 2000. John Dovey, *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*, Pluto Press, 2000. Winston, *op.cit*

⁶ Winston *op.cit* p.54.

⁷ For a fuller account of the role of this series, see John Ellis *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, I.B.Tauris, London 2000 p.141.

spin-off programmes of their own⁹. An alternative line of critique was that of 'exploitation' of the subjects of documentary, who, it was argued, were not prepared for the kind of exposure that these early evening series would give them¹⁰. Documentary had found a new popularity by exploring the mundane, and this was one point of tension that fed into the crisis of 1999.

This tension was intensified by the simultaneous development of a daytime television which validated ordinary people and their discourses in relatively non-hierarchical ways¹¹. British-produced shows like *Killroy* and *Vanessa* played alongside imported series like *Oprah*, *Rikki* and, most controversially at the end of the last century, *Jerry Springer*. Television seemed to many more traditional commentators, to have become both more raucous and more voyeuristically invasive, and indeed these daytime talk series would be caught up in the crisis which engulfed the docusoap in 1999.

The crisis of documentary would not have been possible if docusoaps had only dealt in new subjects. Another point of tension was the novel form of these programmes. Docusoaps were usually series in a 30 minute slot, rather than single documentaries. They were constructed with a strong narrative drive with cliff-hanger endings. Sometimes other explicit entertainment elements were introduced, including music to underline comic moments. The narration was explicit and jokey, often spoken by a comedian or a star from a soap opera. and tended to anticipate and so define the meaning and tone of the activities shown. Docusoaps virtually dispensed with the formal interview, replacing it with an informal chat between director and subject whilst the subject was doing

⁸ Radio Times for week 31 January – 6 February 1998

⁹ This is particularly true of Jeremy Spake who originally appeared in *Airport* and has developed a career as a presenter, and Jane McDonald, for whom a role in *The Cruise* led to the success of her career as a singing star that had hitherto eluded her

¹⁰ Winston *op cit* pp143-156 provides a catalogue of cases of exploitation from the history of documentary

¹¹ See for instance Joan Shattuck "'Go Ricci": Politics, Perversion and Pleasure in the 1990s" in ed. Geraghty & Lusted, *The Television Studies Book*, Edward Arnold 1998; and 'Empowering women? The Oprah Winfrey Show' in ed D'Acci & Spigel *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, Oxford University Press 1997

something else. Typically this would involve the subject driving a car whilst questions were asked, guaranteeing informality and increasing the chances of the subject letting slip a momentary revelation because their attention was divided. Series would seem to have caught almost every relevant moment of the subject's life, since in production terms the pre-arranged shoot day with a substantial crew had been replaced by the lone documentary-maker available 'whenever something happens'. Stella Bruzzi has perceptively defined this new aesthetic of "contemporary observational films":

"[They] assume, in their very fabric, that a reality unaffected by the filming process, is an impossibility, concluding that what they are able to achieve is the negotiation of a different understanding of truth – one that accepts the filmmaking process and one that acknowledges the essential artificiality of any filming set-up."¹²

The change was remarkable, but it had precedents¹³.

Technological factors made a crucial contribution in enabling a more intimate style and longer shooting schedules but at no additional cost. In 1995-7 both lightweight DV cameras and fast non-linear editing were introduced. During the period I was producing a series on Hong Kong following around a dozen

¹² Bruzzi op.cit p.98

¹³ The change was remarkable, but it had precedents in Paul Watson's series 'the Family', A BBC1 series of 12 half-hour episodes running from 3 April 1974 to 26 June 1974 showing the daily life of the Wilkins family in Reading. It had used many of the techniques, but was shot on film long before professional lightweight video was available. Watson's commentary, which he delivers, is remarkably similar to those of the recent docusoaps. His concentration on the everyday life of one family brings forward the events of everyday, just as docusoaps do. But he is also justified in his assertion that he is not the father of the docusoap since his series was developed in the context of observational documentary, and crucially avoids any interviews with the participants, let alone the informal ones developed during the Nineties. The Family was a bold experiment, representing the limits of what documentary could attempt and involving a high level of investment. Each programme was shot on 16mm film and edited for transmission a week after the events had been shot. Debate centred on the 'feedback' effect on the family of the intense public scrutiny of their affairs whilst they were still being filmed, together with their 'acting up' for the camera and their decision to bring forward their daughter's wedding date so that it could be filmed for TV. The dominating Mrs Wilkins had a subsequent brief career as a columnist in the London Evening Standard. 'The Family: Ten Years After' was shown on BBC2 on 10 December 1983

residents through the period leading up to the hand-over to Chinese rule¹⁴. Shooting had begun in 1995 using analogue Hi-8 cameras. Sony announced the first DV camera as a consumer format, and it was available in London (though not in Hong Kong) at the end of 1995. With a modification to enable the use of radio microphones, I sent the first camera to Hong Kong in February 1996. The resultant footage was far superior to analogue Hi-8, but as yet no easy editing route existed. By the end of 1996, it became possible to feed the digital footage directly into an AVID with sufficient memory to produce an hour-long programme. Off-line non-linear editing provided a relatively inexpensive route to a far faster cutting rate and, crucially, more flexibility with sound editing than video had hitherto provided to TV documentary producers. Other London-based producers like Colin Luke at Mosaic Films were following the same route, as were BBC producers from Education and the Community Programmes Unit. The technology made possible the spread from experimental production areas of the techniques of long and casual observational shooting leading to successful series like *Driving School* in the summer of 1997.

The docusoap emerged as a new mainstream form and was an unexpected success. BBC Education had intended that *Driving School* should concentrate not on the pupils but the instructors¹⁵. The producers found that the pupils provided the greater interest and shifted the focus of the series during production. It can also be argued that another experiment in extended coverage, *The House* (shot on film) was a precursor of the sudden development of the popular docusoap. This series, made for BBC2 by an independent company, followed the tumultuous regime of Jeremy Isaacs at the Royal Opera House, using a mixture of observation and often devastating interviews. Each programme told a parallel and sometimes interlocking story: the chaos and backstabbing of the administrative operation and the comparative discipline and

¹⁴Riding the Tiger, produced and directed by Po Chih Leong and Sze Wing Leong, Channel 4 June 1997 4x52 mins

¹⁵ *Driving School*, 6 30 minute episodes, BBC1 10 June 1997 to 15 July 1997 8pm, repeated on BBC1 from 24 July 1998 at 8.30pm

restraint of the artists (this seems to have been one of the implications of the rhetorical structure adopted)¹⁶. There are, however, significant differences. *The House* was made for BBC2 and shot on film over a long period and the notoriety of some of its incidents seems to have taken the makers by surprise. *Driving School* was a peak time BBC1 series, made to follow up on the unexpected success of *Animal Hospital*. The term 'docusoap' began to emerge around this time to describe this new phenomenon and was retrospectively applied by some critics to 'The House'. What had once been a rarity, difficult to achieve and fraught with unresolved problems, suddenly became feature of early evening television entertainment.

This shift in TV documentary was the result of a confluence of factors. Budget and scheduling issues played a crucial role, with a cash-strapped BBC embracing the new form as a low-cost ratings winner. Long-form news bulletins were experimenting with the inclusion of short documentary items of 7 to 10 minutes, reducing the need for issue-led documentaries. Other staple genres of low-cost early evening entertainment like gameshows and chatshows had suffered from generic overexposure in previous years. Soap operas seemed to hold their audience in a period of declining numbers for the mass channels, but required large resources and long-term planning. The BBC in particular needed a more immediate solution and found it in the docusoap.

Docusoaps represented a development of documentary practice on several fronts at once. They offered new subjects, new relationships with those subjects, a new visual system (both framing and editing), new forms of narrative construction and a novel place in the schedules. It is not surprising, then, that the nature of factual television was suddenly thrown into question, especially as it happened alongside other developments like the enfranchisement of everyday

¹⁶ *The House*, 6 50 minute episodes, BBC2 9.30pm from 16 January 1996. For a detailed account see Bruzzi op.cit. pp83-5

argument and opinionated speech in daytime talkshows.¹⁷ The questioning became a crisis because of the particular relationship that exists between popular TV programming and the national press in Britain. This relationship is the final element in the overdetermined documentary crisis of 1999.

2. HOW THE STORY DEVELOPED

Scattered news stories had appeared through 1997 and 1998 about the issue of 'fakery' in the new breed of documentaries. In February 1998, it was a Channel 4 film *Rogue Males*, where rogue builders messing up jobs proved to be out of work actors¹⁸; and in May 1998 it was *Clampers* where an over-enthusiastic traffic warden was revealed to be an administrator for the service who returned to the streets for his moment of televisual fame¹⁹. These isolated incidents were the precursors of the crisis of 1998-9. The crisis was ignited, initially, by a piece of investigative journalism by the liberal broadsheet *Guardian* newspaper, which examined a traditional current affairs documentary. Over three days (5-7 May 1998), long reports examined *The Connection*, an hour-long documentary made for the ITV Network First slot²⁰, which won 8 awards and was subsequently sold to 14 countries. The film claimed to show every stage in a new drug route bringing cocaine from Colombia to Britain. For the first two days, the story was the paper's front page lead, and on the third the second lead story²¹. The

¹⁷ As two producers who found themselves caught up in the ensuing crisis put it: "The ratings success of documentary soaps, daytime chatshows and "reality-based" magazine shows have rendered "real life" as simply another one of television's generic labels – rather than as a distinctive guarantee of truth." Adam Barker, Edmund Coulthard, *Guardian* 21/9/98 (on the 'Daddy's Girl' hoax)

¹⁸ Channel 4 17 February 1998 9.30pm, a documentary in the hour-long *Cutting Edge* slot

¹⁹ *Clampers*, a six-part BBC1 series from 11 May 1998 at 9.30pm; followed by a single Christmas show *Clampers at Christmas* BBC1 21 December 1998 at 9.30pm

²⁰ A high-budget current affairs slot shown at 10.30, after *News at Ten*. *The Connection* was shown on 15 October 1998 at 10.40pm

²¹ As the hapless executive producer, Roger James, put it "to find oneself on the front page of the *Guardian*, competing with world news, not just for one day but for three days, I have to say was pretty shocking, and seemed out of all proportion to the story if I'm honest" (interviewed on Channel 4 *Hard News Special* 28 November 1998). James was well-regarded in the industry and was seen by most as the victim of a producer, Marc de Beaufort, who exploited his trust. But it should be said that James's editorial style fitted much better within Central Television than it did in the company that had taken it over, Carlton TV. James seems not to have adapted well to the Carlton environment where an ever-greater number of

Guardian concluded that the programme was ‘an elaborate fake’, detailing how an interview with a drug baron in a secret location was actually with a retired minor bureaucrat in the director’s hotel room; how a sequence showing a ‘mule’ swallowing condoms filled with heroin and successfully bringing them into the UK was faked in separate stages. In the eventual inquiry, it was found that 16 different deceptions were involved in the film²². These deceptions could not be brushed aside as journalists willfully misunderstanding documentary practice, or as isolated lapses by errant filmmakers. An inquiry was mounted by Carlton TV at the insistence of the regulatory body, the Independent Television Commission.

With the inquiry hanging over the television industry, the press kept the issue warm. On 9 August 1998, the Sunday Times revealed that:

“the makers of one of British television’s most prestigious natural history series have admitted to the routine use of captive animals to simulate scenes shot in the wild”²³

The next day the Independent amplified the story in an interview with Hugh Miles, one of the most respected camera people in the business²⁴. 2 September 1998 brought a different angle to the issue of documentary truth. Most newspapers carried the account of Stuart Smith and Victoria Greetham who had hoodwinked producers working on a Channel 4 commission. It was only when trailers for the hour-long film *Daddy’s Girl* were shown that it emerged that Smith was not Greetham’s snobbish father who disapproved of his daughter’s partner, as he claimed to be in the film. Greetham’s real father contacted Channel 4 to reveal that Smith himself was the partner... of whom he profoundly disapproved. Here was a human interest story to complement the intricate recital of facts provided

scoops, exclusives and headline-grabbing programmes were demanded from factual staff. De Beaufort must have seemed a very welcome provider of such material.

²² see for instance The Guardian Sat 5 December 1998 pp.4-5 and Winston op.cit. pp13 – 23 for exact details and discussion of the nature of its transgressions

²³ Sunday Times 9 August 1998, p.1

²⁴ Independent 10 August 1998, p.6

by the Connection story²⁵. Taking the two stories together, it appeared that something was wrong with the documentary system itself. Filmmakers could fool the public, but so could members of the public fool filmmakers. The Daily Mail carried a follow-up feature on 3 September about gullible programme makers, and this is probably the point at which informal popular discourse began to establish the view that “documentaries are full of made-up stuff”. Then on December 5, the Carlton internal inquiry admitted that the Guardian’s accusations were true in almost every particular. The ITC announced that Carlton was to be fined £2 million, to be pocketed by the Treasury. Perhaps the television industry hoped that a December settlement of the Connection issue would mean that public cynicism about truth and documentary would ebb over the Christmas holidays, but this was not to be.

On Friday 5 February, The Guardian reported on page 7 that ‘another documentary fake rocks C4’. Firm action had been taken:

‘Channel 4 yesterday slapped an indefinite ban on a programme-maker after the station admitted that a documentary purporting to expose the life of rent boys in Glasgow had included faked scenes”.

The Daily Mail, however, made the story the front page lead. ‘CAN WE BELIEVE ANYTHING WE SEE ON TELEVISION?’ asked most of the front page, ‘as another Channel 4 fake is exposed’. The collusive nature of the address in this headline is highly significant, and the article concludes with a catalogue of instances:

“Last autumn a £100,000 documentary, Daddy’s Girl was pulled from the channel’s schedules a day before transmission when it emerged that the

²⁵ The trailed programme Daddy’s Girl was pulled from the schedules by Channel 4. However, a programme exploring the issue, Who’s Been Framed shown in the Cutting Edge series on 26 February 1999, right in the middle of the most intensive period of the crisis. This programme revealed that Smith

filmmakers had been duped by a couple who posed as father and daughter but were in fact boyfriend and girlfriend.

The biggest scandal was The Connection... which purported to penetrate the Colombian Cali drugs cartel's new heroin route to London.

In fact large parts of it were complete fabrication...

Last year the BBC admitted that some of the antics of learner driver Maureen Rees were faked for the hit fly-on-the-wall series Driving School.

Historical documentary makers have also been caught out. Last year..." [etc]

Then the following Friday came the second lead on the Mail front page. Under the strapline 'Can we Believe Anything We See on TV (Part Two)' a story about the real people appearing, not on a documentary, but in a daytime talk show: 'Vanessa and the fake chat show guests, full story pages 8 & 9'. On the same day The Daily Mirror's whole front page (and pages 2-6 for that matter) were devoted to 'TRISHA IS FAKE TOO'. The reference in the strapline 'We expose another TV show scandal' is unclear. It might refer to the Daily Mail or it might to previous 'scandals'. The Vanessa and Trisha stories combined the themes of duplicitous programme-makers and deceitful guests. The Mail:

"All daytime chat shows on the BBC are to be investigated for hiring fake guests following the suspension yesterday of three staff on Vanessa...

Two producers and a researcher have been sent home as a BBC spokesman admitted that agencies had been used to book guests since Vanessa arrived from ITV last month. It discovered that four items on the show were certainly affected"²⁶.

The Mirror revealed 'ITV's flagship daytime show Trisha has also been duped by fake guests' with details on subsequent pages of cases such as Eddie Wheeler who 'was a womaniser, a stalking victim and a sex-addict father in 3 separate

and Greetham had been recruited late in the production's development to replace a couple who changed their mind about participating.

shows'. He was quoted as saying 'I can't believe no-one checked me out'.²⁷ The Mirror's editorial summed up the issue making clear that the status of factual TV as a whole was at stake:

"When you watch a film, play or soap on TV, you know it is not real. But factual programmes are supposed to be what their name says – fact, not fiction... Newspapers are accused of many evils and we sometimes get things wrong. But it is rare for a newspaper to lie. Certainly the Mirror never would. Factual television needs to adopt those standards. To respect truth and present facts and people as they are. If it does not, there will be only one possible result. Viewers will switch off in ever greater numbers"²⁸

This was the high point of the crisis and heads rolled as a result, not necessarily those of any guilty party²⁹. The aftershock stories continued for some time: on 19 February the Daily Mail revealed COUNTDOWN FAKES (question-rigging in the venerable Channel 4 quiz show) and March 1 'Is there life after docusoap' (sad lives after 'their 15 minutes of fame is over')³⁰; the Independent on 24 March 'Channel 4 gun-running film was faked'; and the Sunday People July 4 'BBC KILLED MY BABIES' (vengeful father dupes documentary makers).

The characteristic journalistic mode of attack in reporting each incident is to recite a catalogue of previous infractions, creating the impression of an institutional crisis rather than isolated infractions of established norms³¹.

3. THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

²⁶ Daily Mail 12 February 1999 p.8.

²⁷ Mirror 12 Feb 1999 p.3

²⁸ Mirror 12 February 1999 p.6

²⁹ The Daily Mail alleged that Vanessa researcher Debbie Price paid individuals from a modelling agency to play roles on the show. She subsequently received an out-of-court settlement from the paper as the claims were untrue.

³⁰ March 1 1999 pp34-5

³¹ So a story in the Sun 21 March 2002 headed 'Fake TV Scandal' about a "TV producer aged 30 conned a school by posing as a spotty teenager to make a Channel 4 documentary" carried a sidebar reiterating the Connection/Chickens/Daddy's Girl/Vanessa saga (www.thesun.co.uk/0,,200213075,00.html)

Newspaper coverage was a crucial actor in the crisis, and provides a convenient record of it. But it was not, as we shall see, the only actor. Britain's press is different from that of the USA, for example. It is highly concentrated as a national press and has high per capita sales. Its titles are highly stratified (redtop tabloid; mid-market tabloid; broadsheet) and the comparative 'brands' have near-universal recognition for their distinctive approaches. Such a press is able to create a national discourse in the near 55 million population of Britain. Its obsessions and points of reference become common currency in a way that is the exclusive prerogative of television in other cultures. In Britain the news agenda is set by newspapers and the press mutually and in tension. The editorial agenda of all national titles is clear and tendentious. The Daily Mail follows an anxious right-wing agenda, deploring each fragment of evidence of moral decline. The Guardian pursues a liberal republican policy, trying to locate itself as an unwished-for sympathetic critic of Labour governments. Newspaper coverage also plays a crucial role in creating 'event TV' by its large-scale coverage of series such as Big Brother and Pop Idol. This is a form of cross-promotion which nevertheless does not involve any cross-ownership other than that between News International and BSkyB³². It is based on mutual interest in pursuing the current and the popular rather than in maximising profits from popular brands. It therefore takes place in a climate of rather lopsided editorial independence³³.

Study of the popular press reveals a surprisingly large number of stories that dominate one edition and then disappear almost immediately. It is almost as though newspapers try out stories and issues to see which will 'run'. The early examples of documentary 'fakes' seem to have fallen into this category. Yet the

³² Some newspaper groups, particularly News International, effectively controlled by Rupert Murdoch, would prefer a greater degree of cross-ownership than legislation allows. Their editorial stance is indicated by the amount of cross-promotion with their own BSkyB channels, and their attempts to kindle the story (a notably thin Sunday Times front page story, see footnote 23), and to keep the story alive (A sun follow-up two years later see footnote 31). Thus the Broadcasting Act 2003 still prevents an 'excessive' degree of newspaper/broadcasting cross-ownership whilst permitting foreign ownership of core broadcast channels. Such is the perceived importance of the particular interrelation between newspapers and broadcasting to British political discourse and public sphere more generally.

³³ In political terms, there are more national papers following a moralistic right-wing or conservative agenda than there are titles which lean towards the left or liberalism.

Daily Mail returned to its theme over almost a month from the banner headline of 5 February 1999. Clearly something had brought the story into public concern, and that something was radio, transforming print and TV broadcast into chat and community.

4. HOW THE CRISIS SPREAD

The 1998-9 crisis in documentary is by no means a matter of newspapers alone. The press is certainly a major actor in the crisis, and, for this study at least, provides the only remaining consistent base of evidence. The issue became a popular cultural phenomenon because the press stories were able to prompt and foster informal discourse, both within and beyond the media. Newspaper stories have, in Britain at least, a wide readership. They provide a convenient source of topics for media chat, which is an ephemeral activity that has scarcely been studied to my knowledge. It is the reason for the apparently fickle attitude of British national newspapers with a popular address. Issues appear and disappear with no logic that can be determined from textual analysis. Newspapers float many stories, but continue only with those that enter into general circulation as part of the immediate ephemeral moment. The 1998-9 documentary crisis entered into such a general circulation. The remarks of DJs and the interventions of phone-in callers became part of an even more informal and unrecorded set of exchanges: everyday speech.

Morning drivetime Radio DJs will make topical jokes based on the day's newspaper stories, or indulge in rants about particular items. Daytime talk radio phone-ins offer a large number of themes to their listeners, many of which derive from newspaper stories. Researchers for daytime TV shows (and documentaries) use newspapers as information bases, contacting writers and the subjects of stories with requests to appear. The pressure to be entirely contemporaneous and of the moment is particularly strong for radio. Radio presenters attempt to

become part of the ordinary conversations of the moment through which their audiences constitute themselves as a group with a transient but real social identity. But these presenters are isolated in soundproof studios with, at best, small support teams. Phone calls and phone-ins have long been used to overcome this isolation. Now, the internet is becoming the major influence on radio talk, through the scanning of chatrooms and the use of listeners' emails to the producers.

In this way, a topic can develop 'a life of its own' by appearing in many forms of speech at once³⁴. It then becomes part of the small change of social intercourse, a theme on which an average citizen is likely to have something to say. So people who lived through the period of the 1998-9 documentary crisis are apt to remember, when prompted, 'something about' this moment. They can recall the moment when 'everybody' distrusted documentaries, when scepticism became a general attitude and individual instances of documentary material seen on TV were picked over to see if 'we could catch them out'.

More direct and, as it were, textual evidence of this necessarily ephemeral speech has ceased to exist, as has almost all of the radio material as well³⁵. Some evidence remains in the tenor of TV current affairs like Channel 4's attempted counterattack against the Guardian on the Connection issue³⁶, and may exist in daytime talk material as well. Other evidence of the public and general nature of the discourse can be deduced from the letters published by newspapers or the rhetorical nature of the Daily Mail's front page question. But the moment has passed, and the only consistent source for a narrative of the kind I have offered is one of its principal protagonists, the newspaper industry, tested against individual recollections and deductions about the subsequent

³⁴ Marketeers know this process as 'viral marketing'

³⁵ Annette Hill lead a research project at the University of Westminster which interviewed a large sample in the period just subsequent to the one under discussion here. Different issues arise, but the complexity of views and practical engagement with the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of documentary are very evident. Publication forthcoming.

³⁶ Hard News special, op.cit.

response of programme makers and the television industry. Yet the existence of such lost thought and speech can still be posited as a vital component of a particular historic event: the documentary crisis of 1998-9.

5. FACT AND FICTION AS GENRES

The crisis was a crisis in genre relations. Genre is a set of practical (as opposed to the theorised or even formalised) meanings and understandings that circulate between audience, makers and institution. Documentary depends on a constantly renegotiated understanding of the status of its footage as evidence, based as it is on an impossible but necessary project: that of aligning recording with reality, image with incident. This is what is happening in all the welter of accusations, suspicions and speculations in the early months of 1999.

Broadcast television is particularly sensitive to the practical renegotiations of documentary. Broadcasting has a particular relationship with the everyday world of its viewers. Through its co-presence, the liveness inherent in the fact of transmitting scheduled material, the currency of its habitual use of direct address formats as opposed to the historicity of cinema, broadcasting works through a society's collective concerns about 'our world', how we perceive it, how we are in it³⁷. This renders it ephemeral yet central: important enough to figure on the front pages of mass newspapers and in the deliberation of governments. The status of its images matters because it connects with the everyday sense of reality, of human fact and potential, which contemporary citizens inhabit.

Documentary is the neuralgic point in establishing factuality in broadcasting. Broadcast television mixes 'the factual' and 'the fictional' and attempts to establish a boundary between them. The boundary is a soft one, pushed at from both sides: not only by programme makers but also by 'members of the public',

³⁷ For a further exploration of these issues, see John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, I.B.Tauris, 2000

or the 'subjects of documentary'. The documentary crisis of 1998-9 demonstrates both kinds of pressure on that boundary. It embraces examples of people pretending to be what they are not in order to deceive factual programme makers; and programme makers pretending that their footage can claim a factual status.

The boundary may be soft, but it is essential. It defines two distinct regimes of attention, two distinct regimes of response: those of the factual, 'our world', and those of fiction 'a parallel world'. Different attentions are invited, sought and offered by each. Documentary invites a viewing activity of inspection and criticism. Fiction involves a "suspension of disbelief" and empathy. Factuality involves a foregrounding of indexicality, of the specifics of each image. From a subject/performer's point of view, acting is appropriate to both, but different acting. Acting 'yourself' is appropriate to the factual. 'Hamming it up' being 'shifty' or 'reticent' are fine in modern factual programmes, so long as what is presented is a version of 'yourself'. Fictional acting involves convincing pretence, in a calculated and intentional emotional range appropriate to the particular generic register operationalised by the fiction (melodrama, naturalism etc). Those who take fiction as fact are viewed as rather simple, if not socially dysfunctional. Examples include the aliens in the film *Galaxy Quest*³⁸ who take a Star-Trek-like TV series to be "historical documents"; or the obsessives who conflate soap opera actors and the roles they play.

Fiction can adopt the stylistic traits of factual filmmaking without problems. Fiction can adopt the visual and narrational styles of factual programmes to produce drama-documentary, and can exploit documentary conventions in sitcoms like *The Royle Family* and *The Office*³⁹. Once fiction is passed off as fact, the situation becomes more complicated. Documentary tends to trade across the

³⁸ *Galaxy Quest*, dir Dean Parisot, 1999

³⁹ *The Royle Family*: 3 series of 6 30 minute episodes BBC2. Series One: BBC2 from 19 October 1998 at 10pm repeated BBC1 from 5/7/99, 10pm. Series 2: BBC2 from 23 September 1999 at 10.30pm, repeated BBC1 1/6/00 at 9.30pm. Series 3, BBC1 from 16 October 2000 at 9.30pm.

boundary between fact and fiction on an everyday basis, adopting, tactically, some of the habits of fiction in order to bring structure to the sometimes intractable indexicality of its imagery, and to complexify its portrayal of a multi-faceted reality. Problems occur when material proposed as fact involves more fictional elements than the current generic understandings would allow.

The renegotiation of the generic relations of documentary concern the nature of documentary's trading across the boundary between fiction and fact. Once documentary is in doubt, then the factuality of factual material (news included) is in doubt. This point is often misunderstood by industry practitioners. Shaun Williams, then Chief Executive of the producers' association PACT tried to claim that

“One of the problems here has been a blurring of a number of quite separate issues. There's a big difference between hoaxers unknowingly used, reconstructions and blatant deceptions and fakery”⁴⁰

Such a separation cannot be maintained in the face of popular generic discourses and beliefs about the status of factual television. The regime of factuality is threatened equally by all of these practices, and their combination at the end of the 1990s ensured that a crisis of belief in television's regime of factuality was likely to happen.

6. THE ISSUE OF TRUST

The crisis centered around two questions: whether undue artifice had entered into the construction of programmes, and whether the people appearing in

The Office: 6 part series BBC2 from 9 July 2001 at 9.30, repeated BBC2 from 14 January 2002 at 10.30

⁴⁰ Broadcast 9 April 1999

documentary and factual programmes were assuming identities that were not their own. In both cases, at stake was not so much truth in general as trust and its betrayal. Implied in the criticisms is an understanding of trust

“Here we are engaged in a chain of trust, from the director of programmes right through to producers, directors, editors and researchers to the viewer. If we claim something is astonishingly good, bad surprising or in some way exceptional, it damn well should be. No poetic licence here”⁴¹

As a BBC spokesperson told the Daily Mail: “The BBC has a contract of trust with audiences and they must be able to believe in the integrity of programmes”⁴². An ITC spokesperson later told them “Viewers have a right to expect that anything they see on a factual programme has been properly vetted. We take this seriously”⁴³. This is clear proof of the idea that generic values are based upon assumptions shared between audience, filmmakers and institution. This chain of trust was breached by programme makers (The Connection, Chickens) and by those appearing on the programmes (Daddy’s Girl) and in some cases both at different times on the same series (Trisha, Vanessa).

The crisis began to deepen when questions of artifice in construction gave way to questions of artifice in identity. The existence of a relationship of trust within the genre normally ensures that instances of reconstruction, elision and even (as in the sub-genre of history programming) straightforward staging of events are all taking place within the normally accepted trade across the boundary with fiction. Artifice in personal identity is quite another matter. The documentary genre, and the factual programmes that draw their values from it, involve a precisely defined set of values around identity.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Roger Graef, Broadcast 9 April 1999

⁴² Daily Mail 12 February 1999)

⁴³ Daily Mail % February 1999 quoting a spokesperson of the Independent Television Commission

⁴⁴ This issue is explored in more detail by Dovey op.cit. especially pp.103-153. However Dovey is concerned with "the limitations of the docu-soap in which the form itself has the sense of flattening out difference leaving the viewer

Graef's 'chain of trust' exists to guarantee authenticity. Authenticity has its levels, and the position of readership offered to the factual programme viewer is one which invites critical comment and analysis of the behaviour and motives of the factual subjects. Just because a subject bursts into tears, it is not necessary to assume that their tears are produced by their ostensible emotional state. It might all be a calculation; it might be crocodile tears. Making such deductions from the demeanor of documentary subjects is part of the contemporary viewing pleasure of such programmes. But to discern levels of authenticity, concealment and calculation depends on an ultimate level of authenticity, a self-hood behind the veils. The fictional mode of performance, deliberately adopting an identity which is other than the self, undermines this relationship. And the fictional mode of performance was adopted alike by those who hoodwinked honest programme makers and honest artists who were commissioned by programme makers to perform identities not their own.

"Why didn't they check?" is the basic question asked even by the hoaxers themselves.⁴⁵ Within this generic relationship, viewers trust the authority and reliability of the television institution to police itself. Producer guidelines exist, training exists, professional discourses and practices exist and, in the last

little or no room for understanding or empathy with any of the characters" (p.172), rather than, as I am here, with the tensions within the institutions of understanding of factual material which can bring viewer scepticism and even distrust and disbelief to the fore. The experience of contemporary factual programming seems to me to depend on engaging the viewer's critical assessment of programme subjects, their demeanour and their behaviour.

⁴⁵ Daily Mirror 12 February 1999: quotes Sharon Wolfers "I was astonished how easy it all was. They didn't even carry out any checks. Even when they were filming I thought 'I can't believe we are getting away with this' Noel Antony who acted her husband is quoted: "They didn't ask any questions to verify who we were. I got the impression they just wanted a good show". The report further quotes Eddie Wheeler who made 3 fake appearances in 18 months "I can't believe no-one checked me out. The programme was going to be dealing with sex problems and as a dare to myself I rang up the night before and asked if I could appear. They agreed. Once I was on, inventing the story was easy. The girlfriend I spoke about didn't exist. It was all rubbish ... "I found it absolutely staggering. The fact that people like me can appear on these shows and tell a different story each time makes an utter mockery of daytime television"

analysis, the regulators' sanctions exist to give institutional guarantees that this trust is justified. Yet this television institution was, at the time, working under the strains of a downward pressure on costs and an increasing 'just-in-time' production in both documentary and factual talk shows. Both of these pressures reduced the ability and even the possibility of checking the identities of documentary and factual participants. This does not, however, as many in the industry think it does, explain the whole of the situation. Nor does it account for the speed and efficiency with which documentary production moved to re-establish a working generic relationship. Trust had to be re-established between audiences, institutions and filmmakers. Documentary programme makers had re-established a prominent position in the schedules by making a startling series of innovations at many different levels within the genre. These innovations may have caused the crisis of 1999, but they also provided its solution.

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7. HOW THINGS CHANGED AS A RESULT OF THE CRISIS

Television adopted two solutions to the crisis. The first was a short-term damage limitation exercise, which ensured that newspapers would lose interest, and that the issue would fall out of everyday currency. The appropriate people and companies were punished; internal guidelines and practices were tightened up; and the BBC quietly retired the Vanessa show soon after. This was the organised institutional reaction. Amongst programme makers, commissioners and senior executives, a shift in approach to documentary production can, with hindsight, be discerned. The view that the docusoap boom was over began to take hold, and the search was on for replacement formats. This period sees the criticism of *Lakesiders*⁴⁶ as a weak example of the format, together with the move towards 'lifestyle' programming like *Ground Force* and *Changing Rooms* in the slots occupied by docusoaps. Programme makers already in production began to edit their material to take account of the general climate of scepticism about their

⁴⁶ See Bruzzi op.cit. pp86, 92-3

work. Programme makers about to enter production were more than usually wary of being duped by hoaxers. Out of these various reactions emerged a general trend, one which, surprisingly perhaps, sought to guarantee authenticity by increasing the level of explicit artifice.

Within the texture of programmes, this meant introducing or increasing the marks of intentionality and making explicit the constructed nature of the programme. Documentaries would include the marks of the unexpected and the unplanned, where the filmmaker was taken by surprise. These are intimate details of the camera or the microphone not quite catching something, the hasty zoom, the hurried reframing, the stumbled line, the bleeped expletive, or where the director asks a particularly stupid or inappropriate question. Such elements would previously have been eliminated; now they were prized. Such footage vaunts the honesty of filmmakers because it makes explicit some of the work of construction involved. This reaction was a reply to the accusations of excessive fakery in documentary construction. It also responds to the developing popular connoisseurship of the camcorder generation, an increasing awareness of 'how did they do that' which is demonstrated in phenomena like the examination of special effects as well as an ability to spot 'faked' footage.

At a more managerial level, the problem was one of responding to the faltering quality of documentary raw material. The solution developed was the development of formats which used explicitly manufactured rather than found situations. Some were well-established already. BBC2's *Back to the Floor*⁴⁷ was originated at roughly the same time as *Driving School*, but as a response to a different set of problems for documentary: the lack of companies willing to allow

⁴⁷ *Back to the Floor* began as a 6 part series on BBC2 from 28 October 1997 at 9.50pm, and so would have been in production at the same time as *Driving School*. Series 2 ran from 10 November 1998; Series 3 from 28 October 1999 (an 8 part series repeated in august 2000) and Series 4, also 8 parts, from 1 November 2000, all on BBC2

observational documentary filmmakers into their operations⁴⁸. Confronted by public relations departments who made the simple deduction that documentary meant unnecessary problems, *Back to the Floor* artfully combined flattery with a situation that could allow a degree of control by PR departments. Senior or chief executives were invited to take on, for a week, the humblest job in their organisation and then take back to be boardroom the lessons learned. A certain latitude in observational rules could be accommodated⁴⁹. The transparently constructed nature of the situation, a challenge to the documentary subject, rebalanced the documentary relationship, enabling a new take on documentary's challenge to the viewer: spot the authentic person behind the performance of self. From another direction (and broadcasting environment, the Netherlands) came a more audacious combination of the gameshow challenge and the observational documentary: *Big Brother*. This phenomenon takes the technological and aesthetic advances of docusoap, with its extended coverage and its use of ordinary people doing mundane things. It combines this with the most explicitly constructed of all situations, enabling an unhindered pursuit for the viewer of the game of spotting the truth of personality behind the affectations and postures of the performance of self. The performers know they are being watched. One of the few things they have to talk about is the fact of being watched and their motivations for being involved. *Big Brother* employs an extreme artifice in its format in order to access the truth of personality. In the success of *Big Brother* as a feature of Britain's summers from 2000 to at least 2005, we see the final closure of the crisis of 1998-9 in a reassertion of the impossible but necessary quest for truth through factual programme making. It has changed, probably for ever, the relationship between documentary makers, their subjects and their audiences⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ as Roger Graef was able to do in *The Space Between Words* and *State of the Nation*, and most famously, in *Police* in the 1970s See Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*, BFI London 1995 pp.207-10

⁴⁹ In the episode of 18 November 1999 at 9pm, for example David Ford, chief executive of the catering company Gardner Merchant does not carry a radio microphone, so chance remarks and asides, the meat and drink of the docu-soap, are not captured.

⁵⁰ "I've noticed a marked difference over the last seven or eight years in people's attitude towards being on television" says Rob Cary, executive producer for factual entertainment at indie Menthorn. "I used to work

8. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of the present, the most striking aspect of the crisis of 1999 is that it is now almost forgotten. The moment was ephemeral, but that is not to imply that it was unimportant. An enduring crisis in the generic relations of factuality in television would be insupportable within the fabric of contemporary society. So in this case an amended set of beliefs and behaviours was quickly elaborated and these continue to evolve. The remaining problem is an analytic one: how to grasp the complexities of those ephemeral moments which together organise the fundamental and enduring structures of genre.

on the first generation of reality shows like *The Real Holiday Show*, and they are far more media-savvy these days. One thing we found with *Britain's Worst Drivers* (C5) is how the drama and vocabulary of *Big Brother* has just seeped into the public psyche. So when we were doing challenges in cars with contributors they would refer to them as 'tasks' and when we shoot the interviews with them on DV they would call that the 'diary room.' (Broadcast 25 July 2003 p.14)