Walking Around Is No Excuse for Bad Books – authoring spaces in documentary practice

ABSTRACT
Walking Around Is No Excuse for Bad Books is the title of a practice-as-research documentary film that aims to contribute to the evolution of documentary language in both theory and practice. Greg’s article incorporates images of film stills. In it, he seeks to contextualize, augment and reflect on his documentary film and the construction of authorial voice in documentary practice. Particular attention is given to the function and reliability of the documentary narrator, and the use of a non-realist, textured aesthetic in depicting psychological, emotional and spiritual spaces. By foregrounding the documentary author within the research and production processes, the article also seeks to encourage further exploration of the relationship between documentary spaces and their referents in the real world.

INTRODUCTION
Documentary production is a complex system of communication. Like any language, it has its morphological units and syntax; it has its regional variations, dialects and jargon; it has its semantics and its semiotics. Languages evolve, acquiring new vocabularies and grammar whilst simultaneously shedding
older, outmoded terms and expressions. Languages must adequately represent the changing needs of society; they survive through transmutation and adjustment, borrowing from one another, widening and branching in a process of constant change and renewal.

In western terms, the expository documentary is a first language; we are native speakers, familiar with its most basic expressions and colloquialisms. The classic expository text has become the dominant documentary dialect – interviews, voice-over and images which illustrate the commentary. In these terms, a documentary should also adhere to a rational or cause-and-effect structure, a narrative coherence or, as Bill Nichols prefers, a ‘documentary logic’ concerned ‘with traditional principles of analysis, rhetoric and argument’ (Nichols 1991: 118). For general audiences, the expository film-maker’s voice has come to signify a reliable account of the particular subject under discussion.

The documentary voice has long been encumbered with journalistic and pseudo-scientific expectations: the gathering of evidence, the balancing of material and the objective presentation of accurate and informative data. Since Grierson first expostulated his theories on a democratizing cinema, documentaries have been burdened with the reductive task of educating audiences, with the author being decentralized and hidden from the viewer. In traditional terms, the poetic component of Grierson’s theories1 (and of some early European documentaries2) has been purged from the documentary mandate, while the tenets of journalism have been extolled. Despite developments in academic debates around authorship and voice in documentary in the last decade,3 the majority of practicing film-makers are reluctant to discuss the inherent subjectivity of their work. This is no less the case in reflexive and participatory documentaries that accentuate moments of artifice and process in an effort to address questions of aesthetics and truth. Reflexive devices offer an alternative to the film-maker – new ways to generate trust and to ratify their authenticity, however superficial. Despite their early appearance in the history of the documentary form,4 these approaches remain in the minority and their methods often serve only to secure the viewer’s trust in new and more complex ways.

Walking Around Is No Excuse for Bad Books is a practice-as-research documentary that aims to contribute to the evolution of documentary language through offering a new understanding of and approach to the construction of authorial voice. The film is the main research outcome of a series of investigations and experiments that address the function and reliability of the documentary narrator, and the representation of psychological, emotional and spiritual spaces. Some early guiding questions that emerged included, How can the documentary author transform a recognizable documentary world into an alternative, subjective and internal landscape? How can film-makers imprint meaning onto their images and recognizable documentary world into an alternative, subjective and internal landscape? How can film-makers imprint meaning onto their images and reassert their role as an author of creative texts? Essentially, the project aims to engage with who is speaking, what they are saying and how they are saying it.

VOICE, LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

In documentary practice the question of voice is neither exclusive nor literal. Documentary film-makers articulate themselves through a selection and combination of images and sound, utilizing all available means. This process requires an ‘organizing logic’ (Nichols 2001: 46) or rationale, which motivates all decisions made in relation to composition, sound, editing, narrative, material and style. Each specific organizing rationale means that individual documentaries retain

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2. Seminal examples include Ruttmann’s Berlin Symphony of a Great City (1927), Ivens’ De Brug/The Bridge (1928) and Regen/Rain (1929), and Vigo’s A Propos de Nice (1930).
4. The pre-eminent examples being Vertov’s Chelovek S Kino-apparatom/Man with a Movie Camera (1929) and Bunuel’s Las Hurdes/Land Without Bread (1933).
a unique voice in spite of thematic similarities. In this sense, each film becomes ‘one voice among the many voices in an area of social debate and contestation’ (Nichols 2001: 43). Perhaps compelled by the notion of an ‘organizing logic’, Bill Nichols argues that the voice of documentary is the voice of oratory – that, regardless of who is speaking and in what way, the voice of documentary functions to ‘convince’ the viewer of a particular perspective (Nichols 2001: 49).

A canonical example of this divergence can be seen in a comparison between the voices of Alain Resnais’ *Nuit et Brouillard/Night and Fog* (1955) and Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). While Resnais uses a combination of archival photographs and original footage to explore the theme of memory and the holocaust, Lanzmann’s film (also dealing with memory and the holocaust) rejects the explicit potential of archive material in favour of detailed witness testimony. Both films rely heavily on the spoken word – Resnais uses a poetic voice-over throughout while Lanzmann’s film is composed entirely of interviews. Lanzmann’s authorial voice is implicit, while Resnais’ addresses the viewer more directly. They speak with distinctive and divergent voices.

Irrespective of formal method and propelled by restrictive debates in documentary theory, documentary practitioners often seek to preserve events from the real world for consumption and consideration by the viewer. The implication is that truth can be preserved from its source through the production process and finally delivered intact to the viewer. This sense of preservation represents, at best, an unrealistic and unsophisticated conception of documentary’s relationship with its own source material, of the signified and the signifier. Roland Barthes frequently draws attention to the plurality of meaning in any act of communication:

[…] a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can read, they are indeterminable […] the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language […].

(Barthes 1970: 5)

Language is infinitely complex; it is full of hidden meanings and barriers, and the potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication is a constant danger. The semantics and semiotics of language dictate that there can never be a definitive meaning in any communication act.

In contemporary practice, a steadily increasing number of documentary film-makers are more readily prepared to discuss the epistemological resonance of their craft. In the aftermath of Direct Cinema and the prescriptive ambitions of its practitioners, a minority of film-makers now embrace the concept of a mediated reality, demonstrating and experimenting with the poetic articulations of documentary language by reasserting the voice of the documentary author. Sergei Dvortsevoy, whose existential observational documentaries include *Chlebnyy Den/Bread Day* (1999) and *V Tennote/In the Dark* (2004), discusses the author’s mediated craft in terms of breathing and structuring:

I try to build story in such a way that I do not destroy the vision of reality, the subject which I shoot. I don’t destroy the breathing. For me it’s very important to tell the story, but at the same time to put breathing inside the story: breathing which relates to the subject. Every person has
their own rhythm of breathing and for me it’s very important to pass it on. Very often if you build story, you are forced to destroy the breathing of life because you must build which means you must cut, you must kill to make a structure and you feel this contradiction.

(Dvortsevoy 2008)

Although Dvortsevoy acknowledges the need to balance the energy of the source material with the authoring process, there are resounding echoes here of Grierson’s problematic definition of documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson, in Hardy 1996: 13) – how much actuality remains following the creative treatment or, in Dvortsevoy’s terminology, how much of the breathing remains after structuring takes place?

Film-maker and philosopher Hito Steyerl draws on Walter Benjamin’s 1916 text ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Men’ to argue that documentary production ‘translates the language of things into the language of humans’ (Steyerl 2006). She suggests that the discursive treatment of the real world in documentary is not so much about realism and representation, but about presencing and translation. The concept of translation in this sense is useful for reconsidering documentary’s relationship with the real world. She says,

[…] to engage in the language of things in the realm of the documentary form is not equivalent to using realist forms in representing them. It is not about representation at all, but about actualising whatever the things have to say in the present. And to do so is not a matter of realism, but rather of relationalism – it is a matter of presencing and thus transforming the social, historical and also material relations, which determine things. And if we focus on this aspect of presencing instead of representation, we also leave behind the endless debate about representation, which has left documentary theory stuck in a dead end.

(Steyerl 2006)

Few film-makers articulate their production philosophies in these terms. Werner Herzog has talked widely about the need for the documentary author to reveal ‘ecstatic truth(s)’ rather than definitive, factual information (Herzog, in Cronin 2002: 301). Herzog’s extensive filmography, both his documentary and fiction output, is saturated with thematic and formal explorations of the author and language which transcend conventional notions of knowledge and understanding. Films such as Land of Silence and Darkness (1971b), Fata Morgana (1971a), Lessons of Darkness (1992), Death for Five Voices (1995), The Wild Blue Yonder (2005b) and Encounters at the End of the World (2007) focus on language barriers, misunderstandings and alternative means of communication. His formal treatment of material follows no particular prescription, typically combining expressive music with a Romanticist use of landscape which posits ‘an expanded vision of existence consistently challenging to the perceived spiritual blindness of societal norms’ (Le Cain 2005: 556). Neither does he enmesh himself in debates about authenticity and representation, often preferring to stage sequences for his documentaries in collaboration with his participants.

By thinking of the role of the documentary author in these terms, can the production of documentaries be detached from its traditional obligation to deliver factual, objective information? By moving away from notions of preservation and representation, how does the idea of translation change the role of the documentary author and how, for example, can the language of memories, of
thoughts and of the past be translated into the language of documentary in a way that leads to alternative and enhanced conceptualizations of truth?

**PROCESS AND PRACTICE I – THREE PRELIMINARY EXPERIMENTS**

Although the concept of voice is not meant literally, I began by making three experiments, which varied the function of the documentary narrator. In documentary practice, the pervasive, non-diegetic narrator (usually either the ‘voice of God’ or ‘voice of authority’ narrator) is used as an expository device to communicate facts directly to the viewer. Traditionally, this type of narrator assumes a didacticism or tone of authority that is designed to instruct and gain the trust of the viewer. In *Fforest*, I wanted to use a commentary that had the veneer of reliability and trustworthiness, but was in fact wholly unreliable and intentionally deceptive. The narrator gives unnecessarily detailed, factual definitions of specific objects, but is later revealed to have misrepresented the fundamental meaning of the image he presents. The exercise concluded by suggesting that documentary viewers should be given opportunity and encouragement to interpret the combination of sounds and images with which they are presented in any artistic composition, including a documentary.

In the second experiment, called *Kafka*, I was interested in exploring the opportunities offered by placing the narrator inside the filmic world. Again, interpretation was an emergent theme. In choosing to use a historical figure, I was aware of the effect this might have on the voice of the film. Indeed, as the experiment progressed, the question of ‘Who is speaking?’ became increasingly indistinct. My voice, as the film-maker, became confused with my attempted representation of Kafka as an actual historical personality. The clear question that emerged from this experiment was, How could such a conflict between competing voices be used positively to extend documentary language?

In the third experiment, I wanted to concentrate on creating voice with images and sound and without the use of a narrator. The result, *Fish*, is in fact a thoroughly re-edited version of an earlier film. That film, an expository approach to representing a drag queen, used interviews with the central character as commentary that conveyed an unsophisticated and sympathetic voice. By removing almost all the spoken dialogue, simplifying the narrative and using unconventional movement and sound, the resulting portrait attempts to offer multiple potential avenues to understanding and relating to the film’s protagonist. The main question to emerge from this final experiment was, How could a non-realist, textured visual aesthetic expand authorial techniques to enable exploration of new documentary landscapes?

**PROCESS AND PRACTICE II – THE FINAL FILM**

*Walking Around Is No Excuse for Bad Books* incorporates, combines and develops many of the findings from the preliminary experiments. The film foregrounds the author’s role in transforming socio-historical spaces into an expressive on-screen space that remains rooted in non-fiction testimony. The aim is to approach documentary production as a process of translation and presencing, and to create the breathing rather than to preserve or represent it.

By exploring personal spaces, it was necessary to return to the physical locations of my own past, some of which held uncomfortable and traumatic memories. This suggested a further dimension to the project objectives. How would revisiting these locations, and the memories that accompanied them, impact on the film-making process and on myself as an individual? Could the
It is vital to mention that the soundtrack is a critical component of the film's construction – the music, which plays throughout, is soft, mysterious, ambient and sometimes euphoric, while the narrator’s voice is deep and whispering.

The production process perhaps be used positively as a form of therapy for resolving past problems and anxieties?

The film is structured as a journey. The non-diegetic narrator arrives in a large, industrial town in the South Wales valleys and roams around various locations searching for traces of a boy who once lived there. The boy is, of course, the narrator, who is in turn the film’s author, namely myself. The journey is punctuated by a series of obstacles that prevent the narrator from uncovering any useful information about the spaces of the boy’s past. He is confident when dealing with a solid fact, uncertain when facts are not available, and confused and scared when forced to confront the absence or invalidity of factual evidence. As the obstacles grow, the narrator turns his reflections inward, discovering mistakes and inconsistencies in his memories. Gradually, as the narrator’s search for evidence is continually impeded, he loses his authority and reliability entirely, in his service both to the viewer and to himself. This necessarily leads to an understanding of his relationship with his town that is not grounded in fact and which is ultimately liberating and redemptive.

The full version of the film can be viewed at http://www.vimeo.com/13123540. Password: WAINEFBB123

This crooked house where the boy once lived (Figure 1.1) offers a wealth of implicit information to the viewer. However, this information remains rooted in the present and within a realist aesthetic. The viewer may expect to discover who lives here now or when the house was built but this would be the traditional space of documentary language. A girl walks into the space. Her presence is certain, unquestionable. Though her participation is spontaneous and incidental, the event works to further anchor the scene in a realistic present. I wanted to translate this scene in a way that would relocate the space in an alternative documentary landscape, to imprint deeper strata of meaning on the event by transforming the girl’s presence within the shot. This shot is not included in the final film.

The narrator introduces the house as a place ‘where people still walk by’ (Figure 1.2). Through digital filters, remapped timing, superimposition and reduced opacity, the girl’s presence within the filmic diegesis becomes more uncertain, more distant. Her movement is ghostly, suggesting the residue of memories and the past. The formerly realistic space becomes infused with non-realist qualities, destabilizing the image and increasing the Barthesian
plurality of meaning within the text. This spectral girl is the protagonist for
the movement from external reality to internal reflection – from conventional
notions of reliability, authenticity, knowledge and authority to the spaces of
fallible memory, imagination, confusion, mistakes and misunderstandings.

On his journey around the town the narrator visits Cyfarthfa Castle
(Figure 2.1), which is also the town’s local history museum. At a distance, this
shot of the castle and its surroundings is stable, clear and pristine. The castle
itself houses many historical artefacts that might offer him factual, material
information about the boy’s origins and heritage. He makes a weak attempt
to emulate the expository narrator, but he is uncertain of dates and names,
remembering only with bitterness that the castle was built by a tyrannical
English aristocrat. This is the first clear indication that the narrator’s voice
is not entirely his own. His balance and objectivity are compromised as the
subjective memories of the boy’s character begin to surface.

The narrator complains that he cannot afford the admission fee to the castle.
The physical materials which occupy this space (Figure 2.2.), the bricks, wood

Figure 2.1: the unauthored space.

Figure 1.2: the authored event.
and glass, stand in the way of the narrator discovering detailed strands of the boy’s past. The fortifications are an obstacle, both literally and metaphorically, to accessing the factual archive within. The authored space (which uses line filters, desaturated colour and a vignette on unstable, hand-held footage) reflects both the narrator’s restricted journey and the continuing shift towards the internal spaces of his memory. With the camera wandering uselessly around the castle perimeter, he can only mutter to himself, ‘stone and glass, stone and glass’.

The narrator subsequently finds an historical survey of the town at the local library. The book is full of names, statistics, diagrams and charts, presented as definitive, quantifiable factual data. But when he notices a mistake in the book, he wonders how reliable the document might be? He then begins a search of his memories, his assumptions; these are also revealed to be mistaken, unfounded or confused (Figure 3). In 1831, there was a significant revolt in the town against working conditions in the local iron works. A major confrontation took place between the townspeople and the army, and the boy (now the narrator of course) had always assumed that it had taken place outside the

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Figure 3: bad books and false images.
Castle Hotel. He had built detailed mental images of the event over the course of his life in the town. When he discovers that the event actually took place in a different location further up the same street, this store of images is rendered completely invalid. What now happens to those false images? And how does he begin to construct new ones based on the new information?

The narrator stumbles upon a lane where the boy had written his name in permanent ink years earlier (Figure 4). He looks for the boy’s name but, of course, it is no longer there. It has been replaced by new names, ones he does not recognize. Despite the boy’s fondness for his home town, the town has no memory of its own; it is shaped only by the people who built and live in it. A town, made of bricks and glass, is not nostalgic or sentimental. At the end of his futile search, there is a very brief shot of a pair of feet and a tripod – an intentional moment of artifice that, perhaps as suspected, reveals the journeying narrator to be the film-maker himself.

This sequence (Figure 5) takes place in the park where the boy played football as a teenager. It had once been a cemetery for the victims of a cholera epidemic...
in the adjoining workhouse. The workhouse has since become a hospital for the mentally ill, a place where the boy’s brother spent some time. It is with this traumatic encounter with his repressed memory that the character of the narrator begins to disappear more rapidly and the boy begins to drive the film. Who has the narrator been speaking for? Why did the boy, upon returning to his hometown, feel compelled to take on the persona of a detached narrator?

This photograph of a group of schoolchildren (Figure 6) is the only item in the film that can be considered a piece of traditional documentary archive material. It is viewed upside down through dirty glass with an unsteady camera and faltering focus. This pivotal moment in the film signifies the narrator’s realization that searching for facts, in the traditional sense, is useless. There is a sudden glimpse of the film-maker reflected in the glass; this brings the absolute end of the narrator and leads to the final redemptive sequence.

The boy leaves home again (Figure 7). The narrator has completely disappeared; he has not spoken for some time. Understanding the world though
finite and prescriptive definition is not useful. Words confuse and camouflage. As the train travels further away from these new discoveries, the authored aesthetic is removed for the final time. The boy leaves without answers but with a new relationship with his home town, his past and his memories and identity. The train eventually disappears into a tunnel where everything is obscured.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

*Walking Around Is No Excuse for Bad Books* draws together and develops a number of the techniques and aesthetic ingredients explored in the preliminary experiments, and it is hoped that these techniques are demonstrated within the film itself. The film diverts radically from prescriptive documentary discursive methods towards an authored space that opens up opportunity for individual interpretation and engagement. The narrator is unreliable, but this emerges from ignorance and confusion, rather than from wilful deception. By undermining the traditional authority of the non-diegetic narrator, the viewer is encouraged to take up a more critical position in relation to the film’s content. The conflict between three competing voices (in this case those of the narrator, the boy and my own as the film’s author) is used as a positive device to undermine the stability of the filmic diegesis. This apparent conflict between voices becomes a necessary component in the growing uncertainty and confusion that emerges throughout the film’s aesthetic. Finally, the film is composed predominantly of stationary shots of buildings and other locations around the town; these are translated into an unfamiliar documentary screen space using a variety of post-production and other techniques to imprint meaning onto the images. The non-realist, visual texture is used to signify shifts between external reality and the psychological spaces of memory and personal history, and to offer a more enhanced route to understanding our relationships with places and the past.

In conclusion, by investigating my own personal history and family, the process of making the film was often emotional and sometimes traumatic. Yet, the project has revealed a number of further questions and potential avenues. Some of these questions include the following: How can the development of an authorial identity and the practice of documentary itself be more fully exploited as therapeutic tools for exploring and confronting personal histories? What, if any, are the thematic and political limitations for such explorations and how valuable would such necessarily subjective investigations be as documents of our world? In revealing and confronting hidden memories and trauma, could the very process of making documentary films be an end in and of itself?

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SUGGESTED CITATION


CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Greg Bevan is a practice-based Ph.D. student at the University of Salford. His research examines the relationship between documentary aesthetics, realism and truth, specifically in terms of the story-discourse hierarchy, authorial mediation and audio-visual texture. He is also a freelance videographer and lecturer in film production, documentary forms and contemporary cinema.

Contact: AH 104, Adelphi House, University of Salford, The Crescent, Salford, M3 6EN, UK.

E-mail: gregwbevan@yahoo.co.uk