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Introduction: The bricolage of documentary and disability

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Abstract	This is an edited collection of essays exploring the intersection between documentary film and disability studies. It is intended to fill a gap in both disciplines: on the one hand, documentary studies need to discuss contemporary portrayals of disability, practices of disabled filmmakers and industry policies that determine access, inclusion and representation; on the other hand, disability studies need to adopt more explicit methodologies that explore film texts, authorship and spectatorship in order to assess the current situation of disability in the television and independent documentary sector. On a more social level, the purpose of this volume is to address the medial construction of disability and reduce 'otherness' as a phenomenon of cultural stigmatisation.	
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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction: The Bricolage of Documentary and Disability

*Catalin Brylla and Helen Hughes*

This collection is enthusiastically engaged in interdisciplinarity, exploring as it does the relationship between documentary and disability studies, both of which are interdisciplinary fields in themselves. Definitions can help to set the scene, and so to start with documentary. With this part of our title we have referred to a historically defined film and television genre, and now also an internet genre, that has been concerned with providing evidence about reality (Winston 2008), or the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ as John Grierson put it in the founding stages of the British documentary movement (Hardy 1966, p. 11). In his introduction to the *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*, Ian Aitken claims it as ‘the first genre of the cinema’ (2006, p. xxxv), but despite its history of over 120 years, it is now, as one commentator claims, ‘less coherent in the twenty-first century than it has been at any other time in its history’ (Hight 2013). We have also thought of the second term, disability, in terms of the established orthodoxy. We use it to refer to medically defined impairments that are identified as political in that they also define individuals socially

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40 and economically as disabled (Barnes and Mercer 2010). The relationship  
41 between the medical definition of disability as impairment and its social  
42 definition as the consequence of a normative society is understood as the  
43 defining debate in the foundation of disability studies, but it too has been  
44 overtaken by more complex theorisations, such as those of the English  
45 professor Tobin Siebers (2008, 2010) and the sociologist Michael  
46 Schillmeier (2010), both of whom seek to reinterpret the historical  
47 archives of disability culture to redefine the direction of disability studies.  
48 Marja Mogk (2013, p. 6) has situated these within the ‘new historicist’  
49 approach, which explores disability in relation to specific contexts, com-  
50 plicating the assessment of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ representations or  
51 fixed positions about disability, not least because of the deployment of  
52 interdisciplinary models.

53 The history of the relationship between documentary and disability is a  
54 significant part of both concepts, as the photographic documentation of  
55 the body has been an integral part of defining what it means to be  
56 disabled. As long as the documentary genre engaged in such representa-  
57 tions of reality, picking up on its role in medical definition, it tended  
58 towards the inhuman in its objectifying gaze at the disabled body. The  
59 embrace of documentary by contemporary disabled communities as a form  
60 of expression that can make a positive difference is all the more remarkable  
61 given the history of oppression that can be found in film archives (Rost  
62 1987; Snyder and Mitchell 2006). This edited collection is testimony to  
63 the vision that the dehumanising stare can be met with a creative look  
64 (Fries 1997). As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson puts it: ‘The look stares  
65 return can range from a mind-your-own-business command to a generous  
66 lesson in tolerance and empathy’ (2009, p. 182). It is also a product of  
67 decades of campaigning on inclusion that the gaze and the look can be  
68 reversed.

69 It needs to be said, however, that the optimism in our volume derives  
70 from the fact that the chapters are concerned primarily with independent  
71 documentary filmmaking that sees itself as counter-cinema, forming an  
72 inherent critique of past and present disability representations in main-  
73 stream films, news and entertainment media. As such, our collection  
74 comes close to Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s chapter on indepen-  
75 dent disability documentary in their book *The Cultural Locations of*  
76 *Disability* (2006), and it differs from the many recent works which have  
77 helped to form the foundation for looking at disability representations in  
78 the mainstream media more generally. For example, Katie Ellis and Gerard

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79 Goggin's *Disability and the Media* (2015) is integrated into the broader  
80 landscape of media policy, looking at the development of disability pro-  
81 gramming as a specialist field as well as the integration of disability into the  
82 mainstream. Similarly, Beth Haller's *Representing Disability in an Ableist*  
83 *World* (2010) puts forward a theoretically informed critical account that  
84 covers news, entertainment, new media and the all important field of  
85 advertising. Focusing largely on American mainstream fiction films, Sally  
86 Chivers and Nicole Markotić's *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on*  
87 *Film* (2010) sets out the cultural theorists' accounts of how scholarship in  
88 disability and representation sits within a broader cultural landscape of  
89 competing embodied identities across the globe. Mogk's collection  
90 *Different Bodies* (2013) promotes a critical understanding of general  
91 screen practice and textual analysis in relation to disability, and it covers  
92 a wide range of forms from genre fiction to autobiography to television  
93 series, contextualised through ideas prevalent in disability studies, such as  
94 crip theory and ableism.

95 A mainstream and general media context is certainly important for film  
96 and disability scholars, as well as for content producers. However, the  
97 space for documentary production and reception outside the mainstream  
98 remains an opportune place for experimentation and inclusion, establish-  
99 ing practices that often permeate the mainstream, particularly as the  
100 boundaries between mainstream and independent filmmaking become  
101 more porous in the age of digital convergence. Thus, in bringing the  
102 focus on to documentary and disability, the purpose here is not to make  
103 the claim that the contemporary independent documentary has achieved  
104 some kind of utopian ideal when it comes to the representation of dis-  
105 ability, but to point to the ways in which documentary has become part of  
106 a process of change in attitudes towards disability so that it appears that it  
107 can be a legitimate part of the struggle for a better future. We have divided  
108 the contributions into three parts with the titles 'Film Practice',  
109 'Representation' and 'Identity, Participation and Exhibition'. However,  
110 this apparent orderliness overlays a process that has been less systematic.  
111 Our aim has been to discover and bring out different approaches to the  
112 intersection between documentary and disability that are current in  
113 debates across the disciplines. Although we can make a division between  
114 different stages in the production and reception of documentary film,  
115 within this there is much variety. In the process of bringing the volume  
116 together, we have come to understand it as a 'bricolage', a term that  
117 chimes with our aim to demonstrate that a cross-disciplinary merger

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118 between documentary and disability is both a creative and a critical way to  
119 shed light on two concepts that are in a constant process of change.  
120 Derrida has explained the pertinence of the term *bricolage* for theoretical  
121 discourse, arguing that the process of taking on and adapting existing  
122 terms in a trial-and-error manner from heterogeneous contexts amounts  
123 to a critique of the very discourse and the language it uses. He generalizes  
124 further: 'If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts  
125 from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it  
126 must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*' (1967/1978, p. 360).

127 We found this last sentence especially pertinent considering the hetero-  
128 geneity already discussed within both disability and documentary studies.  
129 To bring together a collection of independent essays in this volume is to  
130 highlight the differently configured relationships between documentary  
131 and disability in a pragmatic and grounded way, allowing individual  
132 chapters to analyse a plethora of issues that not only pursue the creation  
133 of new knowledge within the academy, but also place documentary and  
134 disability in direct relation to human agencies outside the academy, such as  
135 practitioners, real-life characters and audiences.

136 We have begun our volume with practice because it is here that the  
137 most significant changes have taken place in the relationship between  
138 documentary and disability, namely in the relationships between film-  
139 makers and participants. In a speech at the Grierson Awards on the  
140 resurgence of documentary in the new millennium, Nick Fraser pointed  
141 out that when asked for their motivation, the vast majority of document-  
142 ary filmmakers said they made documentaries in order to 'make a differ-  
143 ence' (BBC Storyville 2004). However, ideas about what this means have  
144 changed so that traditional notions of filmmakers giving participants a  
145 voice have been transformed into a more democratic understanding of  
146 participation. All of the chapter in Part I, 'Film Practice', are concerned  
147 with voice, sometimes of the community and sometimes of the individual  
148 in an ensemble of voices.

149 Samuel Avery kicks off with an account of his experiences as a filmmaker  
150 filming people diagnosed with mental disorders. The encounter between  
151 an 'abled' filmmaker and a 'disabled' community of individuals represents  
152 a story in which resistance to documentary as a disruptive and distorting  
153 influence is turned around. Avery explains what it takes to gain reciprocity  
154 and trust, and what it means to both filmmaker and participants to  
155 produce a film to be proud of. Annie Tucker and Robert Lemelson's  
156 filmmaking and postcolonial theorising takes place in a much more

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157 structured anthropological tradition. Their chapter is a demonstration of  
158 how ethnographic filmmaking, with its long history of ‘otherisation’, has  
159 used the potential of filmmaking to counteract notions of otherness by  
160 embodying experience to communicate a deeper understanding of how a  
161 traditional Balinese culture acknowledges, ignores or punishes people with  
162 Tourette syndrome. This again contrasts with Veronika Wain’s account of  
163 her decision to make an autobiographical film about her daughter with  
164 18q deletion syndrome. Wain explores the experience of finding herself  
165 compelled to develop her own performance in front of the camera and  
166 questions whether this compromises the ideal of independence and self-  
167 advocacy that are such a strong part of contemporary debates within  
168 disability studies.

169 Catalin Brylla’s work on representing blindness seeks to reconfigure  
170 current stereotypes that operate through the emphasis of binaries, such as  
171 blindness-vision, deviant-normal and them-us – binaries that are informed  
172 by an entrenched sociocultural knowledge shared by filmmakers and  
173 audiences alike. Using a cognitive-phenomenological approach, his practice  
174 aims to mediate his blind characters’ ordinary experiences through  
175 mapping corporeal relationships to everyday objects and domestic spaces,  
176 thus challenging spectatorial viewing schemas in relation to visual impairment.  
177 In a more overtly activist manner, Phoebe Hart’s chapter engages in  
178 advocacy for the intersexual community using a form of autoethnographic  
179 research. In this case the concept of disability is used positively as a means  
180 to create solidarity between people with reproductive aberrancies and the  
181 broader disabled community. Hart argues for the idea that the documentary  
182 film itself is a means to access the collective memory of the group in  
183 the production of new representations which rupture stigma and pre-  
184 inscription. Her concern is with the concept of ‘normal’ and she proclaims  
185 the agency of filmmaking in the hands of disability advocates in breaking  
186 down what she sees as a ‘will-to-normalise’.

187 Part II, ‘Representation’, offers a number of chapters that analyse  
188 particular films that are regarded as having made a contribution to disability  
189 history and its representation. Anna Drum and Martin Brady begin  
190 with an analysis of *The Dreamer*, a film about the star baritone Michael  
191 Quasthoff. The authors analyse the film as belonging to the ‘thalidomide  
192 documentary’ genre, but problematise the ways in which this affects its  
193 status as a music documentary about a star performer. They demonstrate  
194 the ways in which the documentary picks up on this problem because of  
195 Quasthoff’s own contributions, where he asserts that for him ‘disability is a

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196 fact and not a problem'. In his chapter on rethinking ability and disability  
 197 in the work of Johan Van der Keuken, Hing Tsang demonstrates the  
 198 pioneering work of the filmmaker in humanising the representation of  
 199 disabled participants. There is a strong link between this chapter and that  
 200 of Catalin Brylla in Part I in their common inquiry into spectatorship and  
 201 the use of framing to point to the everyday in the portrayal of character.  
 202 Both of these contributions make a link to Michael Schillmeier's rethinking  
 203 of disability through social science. The cooperative practice of docu-  
 204 mentary filmmaking is understood as a dynamic not only between  
 205 filmmaker and participant but also between them and the spectator.

206 Slava Greenberg on the other hand seeks to demonstrate the capacity of  
 207 the film spectator for empathy via metaphoric imagery. Examining two  
 208 series of animated documentaries, she finds that the narrated testimonies  
 209 about life with disability touch the spectator's body by temporarily chal-  
 210 lenging the senses of vision and hearing, thus making them aware not only  
 211 of physical ability but also of social capacity. Her argument is informed by  
 212 phenomenological approaches to film spectatorship developed by Maurice  
 213 Merleau Ponty and Vivianne Sobchack. Anne-Marie Callus is similarly  
 214 influenced by Merleau Ponty and phenomenological approaches to film  
 215 in her analysis of *Planet Snail*. Callus understands the film as a paradox in  
 216 its attempt to communicate the nature of deaf-blindness through an  
 217 audiovisual medium. The film is understandable as a bridge to another  
 218 consciousness via the embodied capacity of sensory perception through  
 219 the film form itself, nevertheless acknowledging barriers to full  
 220 understanding.

**AQZ**<sub>1</sub> 221 Andrea Garcia-Santesmases account of the film *Yes, We Fuck!* marks a  
 222 return in the sequence of contributions to the politics of disability and  
 223 filmmaking. She explores an alliance between queer and disability activism  
 224 in her analysis of an independently made crowd-sourced film which is  
 225 determined to break any taboos associated with disability and sexual  
 226 relationships. Focusing on a variety of queer disabled participants, she  
 227 demonstrates the mutual support between two social groups who have  
 228 experienced the oppression of being labelled abnormal as well as the  
 229 creativity of the alliance in solving problems relating to sexual functions.

230 Part III, 'Identity, Participation and Exhibition', is the least orderly of  
 231 our sections, collating a chapter on disability film festivals, a chapter on the  
 232 role of Channel 4 in the development of disability television and sports,  
 233 two chapters on reality television (reflecting the significance of this form),  
 234 a historical piece on the preservation of sign language, an exploration of

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235 the role of internet video in inscribing new forms of inclusion and exclu-  
 236 sion in the case of cochlear implantation, and an analytical response to an  
 237 art/science documentary project. Bringing together contemporary  
 238 research on a diverse range of issues, this part is the most beholden to  
 239 the *bricolage* principle and it therefore reflects most clearly the state of the  
 240 art. From this part we have to understand disability documentary as a  
 241 leading form pushing forward the general agenda of inclusion and explor-  
 242 ing what this really means not only for people with impairments but also  
 243 for a society that is supposedly inclusive.

244 David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's chapter offers a classification of  
 245 documentaries on disability subjects, demonstrating their range, subtlety  
 246 and capacity for changing opinion, but questioning how widely they are  
 247 distributed and how effective they are in mobilising opinion. In contrast,  
 248 focusing on groundbreaking political and economic developments in the  
 249 UK TV industry in the 1980s, Tony Steyger and Jamie Clarke tell the story  
 250 of early disability programming for Channel 4 produced by Interface  
 251 Production, a collective of abled and disabled practitioners, of which  
 252 Steyger was the co-founder. The then emerging Thatcherite understand-  
 253 ing of audiences as a diverse group of particular consumers had a profound  
 254 impact on Interface's struggle to negotiate between the often conflicting  
 255 demands of audiences, producers and commissioning editors. This strug-  
 256 gle manifested itself particularly in disability sports programmes, which  
 257 interestingly critically echoes contemporary developments, especially  
 258 Channel 4's controversial advertising campaign for the 2016 Paralympics  
 259 in Rio that showcased the radical thinking at the centre of portraying this  
 260 event by adding high production values to the punk idea of the 'supercrip'.

261 Unlike independent documentaries or disability sports programmes,  
 262 reality TV shows penetrate deep into mass culture. Anita Biressi presents  
 263 reality TV in her chapter as constituting a 'model community' for scrutiny  
 264 in a way that pushes disability theory to the forefront of contemporary  
 265 television. Looking at shows such as *Big Brother* and *The Specials*, she  
 266 pursues the question of how this TV format should be examined in the  
 267 context of the political, economic and social realities that constrain or  
 268 enable disabled people in their everyday lives. Robert Stock's chapter, on  
 269 the other hand, argues that reality TV is in effect a complex experiment  
 270 with mainstream aspirations subverting all ideas of norms and achieve-  
 271 ment. Juxtaposing Artur Żmijewski's *Singing Lesson*, a video installation  
 272 documenting deaf people asked to sing as a choir, with Christoph  
 273 Schlingensiefel's docusoap *Freakstars 3000*, Stock effectively demonstrates

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274 the aforementioned permeability at the interface between the independent  
275 and the mainstream.

276 But this part is not only about the ongoing observation of today's  
277 generation; it is also about the increasing accessibility of disability  
278 history. Magdalena Zdrodowska gives an account of the preservation  
279 of early twentieth-century sign language on celluloid film, an astonish-  
280 ingly insightful moment when the medium became a means to docu-  
281 ment the individual styles and collective practice of signing in different  
282 contexts, including lectures delivered entirely in sign language.  
AQ9<sub>3</sub> 283 Bringing this history right up to the present, the Deaf Community is  
284 again the focus in Beate Ochsner's chapter, which explores the extra-  
285 ordinary rapidity with which the internet video has not only inscribed  
286 itself on disability history, but has also become a defining part of what  
287 it means to be deaf. She explores this phenomenon by studying various  
288 political, ethical and aesthetic conditions governing the production,  
289 exhibition and reception of cochlear implant activation videos on social  
290 media platforms. Helen Hughes' final chapter provides a footnote to  
291 all this experimentation with her account of Andrew Kötting's art/  
292 science documentary *Mapping Perception*, in which his daughter Eden  
293 walks her audience through the problem of perception using sign  
294 language, a computerised voice activated through icons on a laptop,  
295 subtitles, her own articulations and the odd scientific visualisation.  
296 Kötting's film serves as a metaphorical colophon to our edited collec-  
297 tion, since it is nothing less than a frenetic experiment with the  
298 combination of documentary and disability, highlighting a heteroge-  
299 neity of voices, modes of address, representations, creative approaches  
300 and critical discourses.

301 What has come out of the work on this volume for us is a sense of  
302 energy and a belief in experimentation with the form of documentary,  
303 using it to develop communities with skills and knowledge to enable a  
304 more complete image of what disability means to different sections of  
305 society. While filmmakers and their collaborators work within a contem-  
306 porary understanding of the medical and social definitions of disability,  
307 they also seek to experiment with the implications of the terms used, such  
308 as disability, ability and impairment, picking up on activist uses of the  
309 terms 'ableism', 'supercrip' or 'otherness' as a means to identify where  
310 they stand in relation to the debates about identity. According to Dyer  
AQ10<sub>1</sub> 311 (1993): '[How] social groups are treated in cultural representation is part  
and parcel of how they are treated in life.' While his point in context is

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313 about the effects of negative portrayal, it can also be turned around to  
314 describe positive developments for the disability community.

315 We will finish with another statement from Nick Fraser, promulgating  
316 the social, cultural, historical and political value of documentaries:

317  
318 They're among the least valued, and most interesting cultural forms of our  
319 time. Improbably, however, they have emerged from a cave of unknowing  
320 into something like sunlight, enjoying a certain vogue. Greater things are  
321 expected of them, as if they had somehow displaced print journalism in our  
322 efforts to understand things; and they are now being sold as a means to save  
323 the world. (Fraser 2013, p. x)

324  
325 Fraser goes on to be sceptical about what is expected of documentaries  
326 given the limited funds available to them, but we would like to stop  
327 here and add that the form has changed and been re-energised in many  
328 different ways, not least in the democratic inclusion of many more  
329 people in the process of making, distributing and consuming documen-  
330 tary. Our volume has been made possible because of the work of  
331 people of many abilities interested in engaging with documentaries  
332 concerning disability. For us the positive successes of disability docu-  
333 mentary, past and present, thus derive from the many and varied  
334 conjunctions between the creative form and the commitment of that  
335 diverse and ever-changing group referred to affectionately as the 'dis-  
336 abled community'.

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375 research aims for a pragmatic understanding of documentary spectatorship with  
376 regards to experience, empathy and narrative comprehension. In a larger context  
377 his work also advocates for the filmmaker's understanding of how audiovisual and  
378 narrative representation impacts on society's understanding of stereotyped groups,  
379 such as disabled people, women and African cultures. He is currently working on  
380 an edited collection on cognitive theory and documentary spectatorship.

381 **Helen Hughes** teaches film in the School of English and Languages at the  
382 University of Surrey. She has published articles and chapters on German and  
383 Austrian film with a particular focus on documentary and experimental film. She  
384 has an interest in activism and is the author of *Green Documentary: Environmental  
385 Documentary in the Twenty-First Century* (Intellect, 2015). She is currently  
386 researching a book with the working title *Radioactive Documentary* on the repre-  
387 sentation of current debates about the future of nuclear energy.

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## Chapter 1

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Number	Query
AQ1	sense seems unclear here – rephrase?
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