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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AQ2 Andrea Garcia-Santesmases account of the film *Yes, We Fuck!* marks a return in the sequence of contributions to the politics of disability and filmmaking. She explores an alliance between queer and disability activism in her analysis of an independently made crowd-sourced film which is determined to break any taboos associated with disability and sexual relationships. Focusing on a variety of queer disabled participants, she demonstrates the mutual support between two social groups who have experienced the oppression of being labelled abnormal as well as the creativity of the alliance in solving problems relating to sexual functions.

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

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

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

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

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

But this part is not only about the ongoing observation of today's generation; it is also about the increasing accessibility of disability history. Magdalena Zdrodowska gives an account of the preservation of early twentieth-century sign language on celluloid film, an astonishingly insightful moment when the medium became a means to document the individual styles and collective practice of signing in different contexts, including lectures delivered entirely in sign language. Bringing this history right up to the present, the Deaf Community is again the focus in Beate Ochsner's chapter, which explores the extraordinary rapidity with which the internet video has not only inscribed itself on disability history, but has also become a defining part of what it means to be deaf. She explores this phenomenon by studying various political, ethical and aesthetic conditions governing the production, exhibition and reception of cochlear implant activation videos on social media platforms. Helen Hughes' final chapter provides a footnote to all this experimentation with her account of Andrew Kötting's art/science documentary *Mapping Perception*, in which his daughter Eden walks her audience through the problem of perception using sign language, a computerised voice activated through icons on a laptop, subtitles, her own articulations and the odd scientific visualisation. Kötting's film serves as a metaphorical colophon to our edited collection, since it is nothing less than a frenetic experiment with the combination of documentary and disability, highlighting a heterogeneity of voices, modes of address, representations, creative approaches and critical discourses.

What has come out of the work on this volume for us is a sense of energy and a belief in experimentation with the form of documentary, using it to develop communities with skills and knowledge to enable a more complete image of what disability means to different sections of society. While filmmakers and their collaborators work within a contemporary understanding of the medical and social definitions of disability, they also seek to experiment with the implications of the terms used, such as disability, ability and impairment, picking up on activist uses of the terms 'ableism', 'supercrip' or 'otherness' as a means to identify where they stand in relation to the debates about identity. According to Dyer (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

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

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

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

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

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Catalin Brylla is Senior Lecturer in Film at the University of West London. His research aims for a pragmatic understanding of documentary spectatorship with regards to experience, empathy and narrative comprehension. In a larger context his work also advocates for the filmmaker's understanding of how audiovisual and narrative representation impacts on society's understanding of stereotyped groups, such as disabled people, women and African cultures. He is currently working on an edited collection on cognitive theory and documentary spectatorship.

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

Chapter 1

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