

Have representations of 'reality' changed within the 'observational mode' of documentaries and if so, why?

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I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been clearly identified as such and that no material is included for which a degree has previously been conferred on me.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The documentary form is one that is subject to (and influenced by) ongoing changes; with the constant development of new technologies that allow for textual diversity and the emergence of hybrid genres. The Lumière Brothers cinematograph, invented in 1895, was dubbed 'pure documentary', as it projected simple images of every day life, and ordinary people.¹ Since then, the camera, among other purposes, has been used as an ethnographic and scientific tool, relied upon as a method of observing 'reality'.² Traditionally, there is the view that the camera does not / cannot lie³; and the assumption that the relationship between the image and referent is an accurate and truthful portrayal.⁴ I wish to look at the extent to which this is still true.

The contextual foundation for this dissertation is based on Bill Nichols' seminal *Representing Reality*, in which he identifies four documentary modes of representation around which most texts are structured: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive.⁵ The observational mode will obviously be central to my analysis, as I seek to better understand its context within modern television. This will be put in comparison to the expository mode, in order to fairly analyse the methods, advantages and disadvantages of both, as a form of representing reality. However, I wish to modernise Nichols' theories, as the possibility of new modes has emerged. Therefore, I will look at newer texts that offer modern alternative styles and modes, which have potentially changed the British television documentary genre for good.

The focus of my case study will attempt to apply the theory discussed to British television. In order to follow its development, I have chosen Paul Watson's *The Family* (BBC, 1974),⁶ from which, it is often considered, reality TV and the docu-soap were spawned.⁷ Central to this study is Su Holmes' article *Revisiting the Family*, published in 2008, that draws upon original archive research undertaken at the BBC Written Archive Centre.⁸ Holmes takes a contextual, reflective look back at *The Family*, and the effect of exposure and stardom. Neglected by Holmes is the recent modernised version of *The Family* (Channel 4)⁹, based on Watson's original. I will use this as a contemporary comparison, along with research of my own, to highlight the changes and developments of the observational documentary for the audience and industry.

This brings into question the definition of the 'modern audience'; interpretations of 'reality'; the problems they present; and how they continue to evolve. Central to this will be Jean Baudrillard's theories on post-modernism and concepts of reality; significantly simulation and 'simulacra'. Baudrillard applies his theories to the mass media, and theorizes that its influence shapes our perceptions of reality.¹⁰ I will analyse and apply his theories to the concepts of the observational documentary and 'reality television', using specific examples in order to determine whether, despite technological and aesthetic advancements, it will ever be possible to capture 'reality' in its purest form; or whether, as Baudrillard suggests, it is too late.

CHAPTER 2: Modes of Representation

Bill Nichols outlines four modes of representation, of which I am going to discuss two – the ‘expositional’ and the ‘observational’. Although my main interest lies in the observational mode, I wish to contrast this with the expositional in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of observational documentaries that are represented through modern television.

Each of Nichols’ modes of representations recognise a variety of different codes and conventions identifiable within documentaries which, as Roscoe and Hight recognise, are ‘mobilised in order to advance arguments about the social world and to reinforce its truth claims’.¹¹ In addition I will analyse how these modes have developed, adapted, or perhaps spawned new modes unavailable at the time of Nichols’ writing. As Nichols’ is well aware:

New modes convey a fresh, new perspective on reality. Gradually, the conventional nature of this mode of representation becomes increasingly apparent ... The time for a new mode is then at hand.¹²

This idea will be central to my discussion of how reality is represented today, and what modes now appear necessary to the modern audience.

The Expositional Mode

In *Representing Reality*, Nichols writes of how his expository mode developed as a discourse from the ‘distracting, entertainment qualities’ of the fictional film.¹³ It utilises a ‘Voice-of-God’ style commentary, often journalistic, representative of an institutional source seeking to provide information about the factual or historical world.¹⁴ This mode has been exploited since the 1920’s (and is still today) as a method of ‘relaying information and

persuasively making a case'.¹⁵ This, therefore, raises the ethical issue of representational objectivity on behalf of the filmmaker or institution behind the documentary. Perhaps the narration is bias, or speaks persuasively; promoting its own agenda similar to that of propaganda? As the term *Voice-of-God* suggests, the narration serves to inform the viewer, to explain the images that are presented, and may be the predominant voice without counterpoint or dispute: 'The rhetoric of the commentator's argument serves as the textual dominant, moving the text forward in service of its persuasive needs'.¹⁶ The exact meaning or level of these 'persuasive needs' differs from text to text. For example, as a form of propaganda, an agenda could be promoted, that is purposefully geared towards influencing public opinion or motivation, beneficial for the state; such as Leni Riefenstahl's documentaries for the Third Reich, funded by Hitler (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935, and *Olympia*, 1938).¹⁷ But the expository mode can also 'emphasise the impression of objectivity and of well-substantiated judgement', by serving and informing the audience, providing information and facts alongside psychological insights, otherwise unobtainable without commentary or institutional backing (i.e. expert input from a psychiatrist, such as in series like *Horizon*¹⁸ or *Dispatches*¹⁹).²⁰ This is commonly achieved through its use of interviews, which can appear objective, providing both sides of an argument. But, as Roscoe and Hight suggest, objectivity can be illusive.

Of course, it is likely that the interview will be conducted in such a way as to undermine the credibility or untrustworthiness of the oppositional voice, thus reinforcing the interviewer's own perspective.²¹

Although this is true in some cases, Roscoe and Hight are making an over exaggerated generalisation. But the point is that the level of control is unclear.

This suggests one can never be certain where the control comes from, nor what their intentions are. There is a certain level of responsibility on behalf of the filmmaker to provide an exposé that is objective and honest within the context of information being provided. This was the purpose of those working within the observational mode, who dutifully felt the audience mature enough to reach their own conclusion about the images presented.²²

The Observational Mode

The 'observational mode' serves to counterpoint the 'expositional mode', and was made possible with the introduction of hand-held cameras and synchronous sound recording in the 1960's.²³ This resulted in two major documentary movements: Direct Cinema in America, 'often viewed as being the single most significant intervention into documentary history'; and *Cinéma Vérité*, as it is 'popularly but erroneously' called in France.²⁴ Nichols chooses to sidestep both these terms 'in favour of more descriptive appellations'.²⁵

However, as Mamber continues to note, the *Cinéma Vérité* / Direct Cinema movement was also a philosophy that was made available by new technology: 'Beyond recording means, *Cinéma Vérité* indicates a position the filmmaker takes in regard to the world he films'.²⁶ The filmmaker does not act as a 'director' but utilises the unobtrusive methods to capture life as it happens in an uncontrolled environment.²⁷ Therefore it aims to capture events as they happen, and present something that is pure, objective and unbiased: 'Such films cede 'control' over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode'.²⁸ It was the director's opinion that the viewer is being offered

a window onto 'reality' that might not be achieved in such a way through any other mode or fictional filmmaking.

Nichols goes on to state how this mode allows for the audience to learn for themselves and reach their own conclusions about what they are being shown: 'If there is something to be gained from learning, observational cinema provides a vital form for such an experience ... that no other mode of representation duplicates'.²⁹ In comparison to the expositional, the observational mode allows for images to 'speak for themselves' without need for interpretation, relying on the image having an indexical relationship with reality and what it signifies.³⁰

However it is the presence of a camera that causes concern for critics of documentaries representative of the observational mode, particularly Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité. With the intention of filming 'life as it is lived', even when attempting to be as illusive, inconspicuous and non-interventional as Vérité's pioneers Donn Pennebaker, Richard Leacock and the Maysles Brothers, the camera itself is not that small. As Bruzzi continues to note,

It seems inconceivable that a current documentary filmmaker would utter naively, as Richard Leacock did ... that the then presidential candidate forgot at times that he was even being filmed.³¹

Once a camera is placed in front of a person with the intention of filming them, no matter what the situation, that person, whether conscious or not, is self-aware of the way in which they present themselves and how they could be deconstructed by an unfamiliar public audience. This brings into question the

element of subjectivity, not on behalf of the filmmaker, but the private and personal agenda of the central character.

Subjectivity also enters into the documentary mainstream via the preference for people, or social actors, who can present themselves before a camera with a minimal self-consciousness and, more importantly, who can inflect actions or recountings with a subjective depth of feeling.³²

Nichols calls the characters in a documentary 'social actors' (likening them to trained fictional actors), who express a sense of psychological depth through their 'looks, gestures, tone, inflection, pacing, movement and so on'.³³ He suggests that the way in which a character chooses to represent themselves, no matter what mode of representation nor style of documentary, it can still be deconstructed as a 'performance'.³⁴ Therefore, it cannot be seen as a representation of the 'truth', or trusted to be representational of such.

Another significant point is the process of editing. I will briefly touch on how editing can be used to denote and signify the filmmakers intent and control. In the Cinéma Vérité documentary, *Defining The Moment*, Keoning states "Every cut is a lie...".³⁵ In its simplest, untouched form, the footage is untainted and pure; but for it to be a commodity (to be distributed and make money), it has to be edited, cut up and put back together again (*recreated*) to make a conventional documentary, no matter what 'mode' it represents. Bruzzi furthers the argument, saying the process of 'scavenging for sequences, edits and shots ... contradicts the direct cinema mantra'.³⁶ There is a conscious level on which the shots are selected and placed together, but if the director is attempting to remain strictly objective (not trying to construct an argument or convey a message, like, for example, within the expository mode), then what

is the purpose for the order of shots? For example in Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) he films an inmate being force-fed through a tube, while the doctor feeding him carelessly smokes a cigarette above the funnel.³⁷ This he intercuts with flash-forward's of the same man being prepared for burial. Mamber describes the editing as 'crude'; and there can be no denying the directors insinuation about the state of American mental health.³⁸

Keoning continues to state "but you tell a lie in order to tell the truth". This admittance from a *Vérité* pioneer and contributor, seems to be contradictory of the *Vérité* mantra. Can you really lie to tell the truth? This could be interpreted as Keoning saying that the truth is a reconstruction and fabricated. It is the filmmaker that essentially decides what we see and the order in which we see it. The connotations are merely more subtle. It is made to seem as though one has reached their own conclusion, but this is not necessarily conclusive.

Essentially, it is the filmmaker who decides what 'the truth' is; the *Voice-of-God* is merely more subtle, deceptive and powerful. As Bruzzi summarises in her text

Vérité ... 'proves' two mutually exclusive things: that documentaries driving ambition is to find a way of reproducing reality without bias or manipulation, and that such a pursuit towards unadulterated actuality is futile.³⁹

So, taking all of the above into consideration, if Nichols' observational mode of representation is reflective of an attempt at providing an objective, 'true' representation of reality, how is this applicable to British television? In order to understand this further I will take a closer analytical look at the development of specific documentaries affiliated within the 'observational mode' of representing reality.

CHAPTER 3: *The Family* (1974) vs. *The Family* (2008)

In 1974 Paul Watson produced *The Family* (BBC1), a twelve part 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary series following the lives of a working class family in Reading; filmed, edited and broadcasted within the same week.⁴⁰ Influenced by its popular U.S predecessor, *An American Family* (PBS, 1973), Paul Watson attempted to offer a true and accurate representation of family life by documenting the families every movement for eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. It is for this reason that Watson has been reluctantly dubbed the 'father of reality television'.⁴¹ Despite his disgust at such a suggestion, *The Family* in Britain was revolutionary in its style, and has since spawned subgenres within the television documentary; notably *Reality TV* and *Docusoaps*.

In the following chapter I wish to take an analytical look at Watson's *The Family* in order to better understand the development of observational documentaries in Britain. Based on Su Holmes' article in the International Journal of Cultural Studies: '*Riveting and Real – A Family In The Raw*': *Revisiting The Family after reality TV*, I wish to further discuss issues of representation and accessing 'reality'.

The timing of *The Family* and Watson's choice of subject bares particular significance to the representation of class and culture in the 1970's, when social unrest and economic instability threatened, and issues of class identity were heightened.⁴² The BBC itself was representational of this, as its productions were dominated by middle-class producers and middle-class

values, which were expressed patronisingly within Nichols' 'expositional style' of filmmaking.⁴³ Feedback of the programme also reflected the predominant middle-class sentiments of conservative Britain.

I cannot see the necessity of prying into the private lives of any family, but if it is to be done then why not choose a family with high ideals, intellectual pursuits, aesthetic appreciation and moral stamina?⁴⁴

While Paul Watson claims to be Liberal, the Wilkins' political views ranged throughout the family, initially giving an impression of objectivity⁴⁵. However, the production documentation reveals that Watson wanted a family with a father 'working in industry and subject to collective bargaining for his pay ... possibly involved in union activity'.⁴⁶ Watson was politically conscious of the significance of the type of family he chose, and hints at his intention to broadcast social controversies of the time.

The Family gave unprecedented and unrestricted public access to a working class family who, in 1974, would rarely have such coverage in the media. Mrs Wilkins states in the first episode:

It gives us a chance to portray ordinary people if you like, instead of actors and actresses ... Our opinions are probably what 60% of the people in this country think, but they can't put it over.⁴⁷

Watson gives them a 'voice', but also attempts to appear aware of the controversy over objectivity and representation. He adopts a self-reflexive style by appearing himself to discuss issues, and utilises expository-style voice over's. Holmes takes note of voice-over comments, such as, 'There are many like Karen...' and 'Heather must take her chance in the growing ranks of the unemployed...' that 'indicate how he envisaged the links between the

Wilkins family and the social and political climate of 1974'.⁴⁸ I might appear Watson attempts to use the programme, not just as a means of observation, but more significantly, as a means of representation – that the Wilkins' signify something greater that he believes is of educational value to the public.

In a recent television interview, Watson states that his documentaries “tell you something about the state of Britain today”; that they serve as a window into the past for the future.⁴⁹ However there was a backlash from working class residents of Reading, one who says in a BBC Audience Research Report, ‘the Wilkinses are surely the most unrepresentative of working-class families’⁵⁰. This is evidence of the danger, and the near impossibility, of getting one ‘stereotypical family’ to represent something as complex and intricate as the British working-class, and avoid criticism. Colin Young takes note in *Sight and Sound*, how Watson tries to encompass particular events, ‘such as a recent miners strike, a three-day week, and a closely fought election in the context of the Wilkins’ family life.’⁵¹ Holmes notes how,

A number of critics lamented the fact that this dynamic didn't really transpire, and they felt that the material largely focused on the (apparently apolitical) micro-narratives of family life. Others insisted that the social aims of the programme had been corrupted by its own publicity.⁵²

This adheres to Nichols' theory of the subjects becoming ‘social actors’, and their awareness of being filmed and broadcast in such a way. Watson recognises this as a problem to be overcome and later acknowledges the framework may have been a mistake, because *The Family* became more ‘a film about them contending with the pressures of television’.⁵³ This is the irrepressible effect of putting an ‘ordinary’ family in the limelight, and is

problematic when trying to represent reality in such a way. As Christopher Dunkley ironically notes, 'It is telling the truth about the way an over-crowded family behaves when it has a BBC television crew living in the house'.⁵⁴

However, rather than just the shooting process and editing being accused of controlling content, the subjects were also. Holmes quotes the *Daily Telegraph*, writing

The family were increasingly cast as dramatic agents, demonstrating a 'self-conscious effort to introduce a bit of controversy, to get an argument going, to jolt the audience with some spicy line'⁵⁵

The idea of Nichols' observational mode, as described above, is to remain discreet and illusive so as not to encourage sensationalism which diverts from reality. However, in the 1970's, the appropriate level of discretion was not technologically viable. Watson's method of filming everything over a long period of time was his attempt at luring the family into a sense of comfort and ease so that 'spontaneity will out' and performances cease.⁵⁶

In relation to reality TV, Annette Hill states how the audience looks for 'moments of authenticity', when 'real' people are really themselves in an unreal environment'.⁵⁷ Whether the Wilkins' home is considered a 'real' environment depends on whether one counts the visible presence of a camera crew documenting your every move to be 'normal'. As discussed, for the Wilkins', their behaviour was determined, to one extent or another, by the crew. Holmes states:

'Despite Watson's bid to encompass the process within a see-all omnipresent gaze, the concept of achieving fame from a documentary context undermines the fallacy that the camera can simply observe, rather than necessarily reshape, the identity of its subjects.'⁵⁸

The Family is representative of Britain's first attempt of capturing 'reality' and 'the truth' in such a way, through observational techniques. Although it was flawed and criticised, it has undoubtedly evolved. It is no wonder, therefore, that Watson is considered as being the 'father of reality TV', as his methodology has been naturally developed and modernised, due to technological advancements and audience expectations. This has resulted in reality spin-offs, most prominently *Big Brother*⁵⁹, but more recently, *The Family's* modern recreation, inspirationally also called *The Family*,⁶⁰ both commissioned by Channel 4; and may at first appear to resolve some of the problems that faced Watson.

In 2008 the Hughes Family of Canterbury had their house fitted with twenty-one state-of-the-art remote control cameras and sixteen microphones, as part of director Jonathon Smith's attempt at 'capturing an honest portrait of family life in the 21st century'.⁶¹ Apart from Smith's fundamental objective, the modern Family is very different from the original, in some ways offering answers to Watson's problems, but possibly resulting in a less engaging conclusion.

The setup was radically different, insofar as no cameramen or director was ever present in the house, but remotely controlling the cameras from a distance. The subtly of the cameras and crew endeavoured to ensure the family home remained a natural environment for them to live in⁶². However, for Watson this use of modern technology is 'a voyeuristic, dehumanised

experience where there's plainly no heart beating behind the camera'. He goes on to state,

By moving your camera around ... you can make the odd little eye that says 'Do you mean that?' Then a truth comes out. This [new Channel 4 version] is just lots of pictures, and the human empathy is missing. You'll never see that light going on in someone's head or heart.⁶³

Instead of the director being present and asking questions, Smith allows for 'interviews' to take place through conversations between members of the family.⁶⁴ This would appear to be a more naturalistic approach, allowing for interaction and information to emerge without the control or presence of a director, who may or may not be influencing events.

The response was that the programme was 'impressively natural'⁶⁵, despite its occasional use of music at moments of 'high drama, or emotion'⁶⁶. This is a benefit of this style of 'reality TV', it 'holds up a mirror to ourselves';⁶⁷ rather than the sensationalism of the *reality game show*. This style, like *Big Brother* and *Wife Swap*,⁶⁸ invents an environment that is 'deliberately structured to generate rivalry and mistrust'.⁶⁹ It looks for contestants to take part; whereas for the 'observational style' the environment and structure are already established within society for the camera to capture. In *Defining The Moment*, British *Free Cinema* pioneer Karel Preisiz (1926 – 2002) appropriately states the act is "wanting what you've got rather than going out to get what you want".⁷⁰ This method of simply 'filming life as it is lived' may seem old fashioned by modern standards. However, the modern *Family*, was for some, a welcome throwback to the traditional: 'when things do get nasty, they're at

least nasty for real reasons, not because some smug TV producers have engineered them'⁷¹.

This leads me on to the post-modernist theory of the 'observational' documentary, whereby technology has allowed for innovation and audience expectation to advance. The Mirror reported that,

Whether the viewing public has much appetite left for spying on ordinary people without the added gimmick of a wife swap or a weekly eviction is another matter.⁷²

But despite this, *The Family* still feeds a natural desire to observe conflict, and even though it claims to be 'observing the ordinary', Smith cannot disguise that it must be viewed as 'entertainment'. In *The Times* Tim Teeman writes, 'The contrived music and theatre of Big Brother and Wife Swap seem strangely more honest'.⁷³ Interestingly, Teeman here adheres to theorist Jean Baudrillard, as is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: Defining Reality: Baudrillard

French philosopher and sociologist,⁷⁴ Jean Baudrillard (1929 – 2007), often produced 'provocative and controversial works'⁷⁵ which sought to evolve and develop theories within mass media and communication that previous ones had not. Although he began by extending the Marxist 'critique of capitalism', he found that the 'productivist metaphor' was inadequate when taking into consideration the modern complexities of the media.⁷⁶ He, therefore, took a more post-modernist approach; to which, most significantly, his studies sought to recognise the difference between the representation and interpretation of 'reality' and 'hyper-reality' within the mass media.

It is not easy to explain post-modernism simply nor concisely, therefore I will just discuss it within the realms of television, and the movement that is representative of the development from the 'modern' to 'post-modern'.

Post-modernity, in its simplest form, represents a stage that postdates a previous period of social life. It is constantly evolving, as it is reflective of the human desire to strive for more within a capitalist society. In *Postmodernism: The Rough Guide* David Morley notes that,

Modernization was always economically driven by capitalism and, as Marx observed, capitalism by its very nature, is driven by the constant need to transform and revolutionise the means of production.⁷⁷

In this sense the 'means of production' is the rapid development of technologies which has allowed for modernization to occur within the media. This has also led to the media becoming a more complex mode of representation for those who choose to use it. Morley continues to state how, 'Artists attempted to create new languages of representation in which to express the bewildering complexity of their rapidly changing world'.⁷⁸ In the same way, technological advancements within modern television allowed for the 'artists' language to develop and unlock new methods with which they could represent the world.

Re-representing Reality

Morley discusses how post-modernism within the media detracts from reality and distorts truth claims.

According to postmodernists, we can never know these hidden truths with full confidence, better to accept that we live in a world of appearances or 'simulacra'.⁷⁹

The 'simulacra' is a theory developed by Baudrillard. It is the idea that information and images are not tangible or rooted in the real world, but exist within a 'hyperreal' space. Morley goes on to say how we live in a 'society of spectacle', where 'the truth has been replaced by its image'.⁸⁰ Baudrillard argues that the development of TV has masked reality, that it has moved away from being a *semiotic* representation, and that the 'real' is now only a simulation – detached and unrooted from our understanding of reality.

First Baudrillard says the image reflected reality; then it masked reality; then it marked the absence of reality. Now, in the final phase, the image bares no relationship to any reality, but has become its own 'simulacrum'.⁸¹

According to Baudrillard's theory, the mass media has taken over our interpretation of reality to the extent that his 'postmodern universe' makes everything a simulacrum – everything has been copied and reproduced so many times that the 'original' is lost, and the 'real' has lost all meaning. He suggests we have lost direct contact with the world: that television is now our world.⁸²

Catching Up With The Family

The development of Paul Watson's *The Family* is symbolic of the modernization of the observational documentary on British Television, and the birth of *reality TV* as we understand it today. While the original *Family* may have seemed innovative and widely entertaining in the 1970's, it would be unlikely that the format would be repeated in exactly the same way, with the 'postmodern audience' to contend with. Michael Ignatieff (1989)⁸³

characterises it as a '3 minute culture' – where people have short attention spans, and therefore can only consume small amounts of simple information in short periods of time. This may seem like an extreme and negative generalisation, but he notes of the media: 'Narrative is replaced by flow, connection replaced by disconnection, sequence replaced by randomness'.⁸⁴ This description is perfectly applicable for a modern programme like Channel 4's *Big Brother* in comparison to the Watson's traditional *The Family*.

Big Brother breaks away from the conventional approach to capturing 'reality', that is, to capture it in its natural environment. Instead of having people well acquainted in a recognisable 'family format', *Big Brother* puts strangers together to see how they will interact. The environment itself is an act of controlled 'randomness' – it is unrecognisable to its inhabitants and out of their control. In an article in *Television and New Media*, John Corner writes how *Big Brother* takes the next 'logical step' in appeasing postmodern society and 'dispenses with the difficulties of extracting the personal from the social by building its own social precisely for the purpose of revealing the personal'.⁸⁵ This new and foreign environment to the housemates is one that none of them can relate to, so their actions cannot be influenced by it in the same way as *The Family*. In fact, the *Big Brother* house could be representational of a part of post-modern culture in Britain, in a number of ways which allows for viewers to observe on a new level; previously impossible within the 'ordinary' of everyday life. For example, *Big Brother* represents the *new family*, as they are faced with challenges and tasks that are as simple as living and working together; cooking, eating, cleaning. This

can be related to by the majority of *Big Brother*'s demographic (young adults and students), who now live in mixed households, often with strangers, and face similar tasks. The programme also faces up to social taboos, and exposes them, by mixing the house with opposite stereotypes, such as homosexuals, transvestites, sexists, ethnic minorities and racists.⁸⁶ Paul Hoggart reports this as 'malicious', as the producers 'concoct explosive situations, then film the Jade Goody's exploding'.⁸⁷ While the conventions may seem this way, and Hoggart is probably not wrong, the statements *Big Brother* makes about society today seems more resonant and significant than those made in programmes like *The Family*.

Big Brother is an example of an environment within Baudrillard's 'hyper-reality'. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he concurs, 'It no longer needs to be rational because it no longer measures against either an ideal or negative instance'.⁸⁸ Some might argue that *Big Brother*, or similar 'reality' television programmes, cannot be considered as such, because it is unrecognisable within the realms of reality, and therefore, perhaps, should be known as 'surreality' television. However, most significantly, Baudrillard would argue that,

When the borderline between the real and the imaginary is eroded, reality is no longer checked, called to justify itself. It is 'more real than real' as it has become the only existence.⁸⁹

Therefore, if you create an artificial environment, like that of *Big Brother*, for example, which is built specifically for its purpose (to house and monitor the lives of people in a confined environment 24/7), then that is 'real' within its own right. On the other hand, with both versions of *The Family*, the natural

environment was adapted into an unnatural one, thus changing it for its inhabitants (whether they were conscious of it all the time or not is inconclusive). Therefore one could conclude that *The Family* attempts to fake 'reality', realism, naturalism, whereas *Big Brother* is self-consciously aware of its purpose and intentions; thus being a truer representation of itself, reality, and the truth.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, have representations of reality changed within the observational mode of documentaries? Reality itself physically surrounds us. It is perceived through our senses, and therefore we know it to be real. Whereas our scope used to be contained within this, there is now an infrastructure that extends it, and is capable of relaying information to us that is neither tangible nor controllable: the mass media. This form of 'communication' that we have come to rely on, has transformed the way that we 'see' the world, and is, therefore, in control of it.

The documentary genre is allied to the relaying of information about the world around us, and has, over time, developed and evolved as a mode of representation. Although the evolution of technology allows for it, it is also the audience that continues to demand, and therefore shape, the discourses of the documentary genre.

Two subsequent questions have stood out for me throughout the development of this dissertation: How is reality actually *perceived* and what *sort* of reality

are we actually *observing* through television? To some extent, I would side with Baudrillard in saying that the mass media has distorted all meaning of reality; therefore it does not exist. But regardless of this, everything seen on television, in one sense or another, must be representational of some form of reality that we can relate to. As explored, it was Paul Watson's *The Family* that introduced the observational, Vérité style to British television, and paved the way for 'reality television'. While his attempt was deemed by some as unnecessary and futile, it was still popular and entertaining; and thus, repeated.

In the 1970's the act of capturing and observing was simple, and for the audience it was a revolutionary and innovative act. Watson's methods were the only approach, and its simplicity was testament to its honesty. However, technological advances led to audience diversity, and the 'purity' of observation was tainted. The fact that is the simple act of observing has become boring. Once it has been done the audience do not need to see it again.

Instead, the institutional forces appear to favour the commission of sensationalist 'documentary' alternatives in order to capture the mass 'postmodern audiences', and the international trend supports this. Roscoe identifies the industries move away from traditional forms of television documentaries (the 'one-off documentary' or 'longer series with more challenging material') in favour of competing within new deregulated environments.⁹⁰

However, this does not necessarily mark the degradation nor end to true or engaging observational documentaries, but demonstrates its ability to adapt, by originating new and innovative styles as a form of contemporary entertainment. This has resulted in documentary sub-genres that attempt to reveal sometimes fascinating, voyeuristic and sometimes sadistic, such as *Bodyshock*⁹¹ or *Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends*⁹²; or those that attempt to recreate the impression of realism, like *The Office*⁹³, *Brass Eye*⁹⁴, and *Da Ali G Show*⁹⁵. But it would seem the predominant documentary form on modern television follows the popular format of the 'game',⁹⁶ (*Big Brother*, *Wife Swap*⁹⁷ and *Faking It*⁹⁸) which offers alternative realities, capable of spicing up the 'ordinary' and presenting challenges unimaginable within our own lives. This seeks to fuel the desire to observe conflict, by continually presenting new characters in new situations (or indeed, simulations) in a way that was impossible within the truest sense of the 'observational documentary'. Contextually and theoretically the sub-genre, reality TV, cannot be considered within Nichols' observational mode of representation, but a mismatch of all of his modes are evident within the modern contemporary 'documentary'.

Nichols later reflects upon this, and concludes

Documentaries always were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows into "reality": the filmmaker was always a participant-witness and an active fabricator of meaning, a producer of cinematic discourse rather than a neutral or all-knowing reporter of the way things truly are.⁹⁹

I believe that, based on the evidence explored in this dissertation, the documentary genre as a whole is constantly finding new ways that are representational of reality. But more specifically, I believe that the

'observational mode' alone is no longer strictly relevant nor suitable as a form of documentary to compete with more populist forms of representation, that are capable of attracting the mass modern audiences.

I have surprised myself through the revelation that reality television, such as *Big Brother*, is actually a truer form of representation than that of *Vérité* style observation. However, I have been forced to make certain generalisations based on theoretical research, and more primary research needs to be done in order to establish real public opinion on modern television and their views on representations of reality. Audience figures alone would not be adequate, as opinions of those who choose *not* to watch (and why), would be imperative. This is also not taking into account the influence that multi-platform environments, digital television, and the internet has had on representations of reality. This area also requires further research, as unregulated and unrestricted global access undoubtedly changes perceptions and receptions of reality, and the world as we know it.

However, this dissertation is itself an example of Baudrillard's simulacrum. Therefore, I cannot claim for certain that it comes from legitimate fact, nor is representational of 'the truth', as the resources are references of references; void of original meaning and context.

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