DOCUMENTARY IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

Of all genres, documentary would seem to offer the most potential to reveal national identities and subcultures in an authentic way.

This paper—derived from a larger book and film project—draws on themes from taped and printed interviews with a select list of Australian documentary makers:

- Lawrence Johnston (Life 1996; Eternity 1994).
- Karin Altmann (Holding On to What is Real 1993; Flipping Out and Hanging In 1992).
- Russell Porter (Koori Culture, Koori Control, 1992; Luchando: Cuba’s Struggle To Survive,1993).
- Dennis K. Smith (Rainbow Bird and Monster Man, 2002; Me, a Camera and 70 Million Locals 1998; In a Small Valley 1996; Angel 1995).

This paper reflects on what drives the narrative content and form of their works especially the representation of national identities and narratives. The paper explores the motif of the anti-
hero in the context of cultural insularity and heterogeneity as well as the vulnerability of the Australian documentary film industry within a global cinema market.

**BRENDA:**
Our paper focuses on a theme from a book and film project that we are collaborating on about Australian documentary filmmakers. We are exploring the motif of the hero and anti-hero in the context of cultural insularity and heterogeneity as well as the vulnerability of the Australian documentary film industry within a global cinema market. We assume that of all genres, documentary would seem to offer the most potential to reveal national identities and subcultures in an authentic way. The project involves interviews conducted in 2002 and in 2004 with a number of Australian documentary makers. However in this paper we concentrate on comments made by Steve Thomas, Lawrence Johnston, Karin Altmann, Russell Porter and Dennis K. Smith.

**ANITRA:**
‘Documentary’, to use Karin Altman’s words, is ‘trying to fashion order out of experience.’ The significance of the hero/anti-hero in Australian documentary filmmaking is a thorny point: Brenda and I take up distinct positions on this. Brenda believes that heroes are important for the national psyche; the anti-hero appears in our documentaries in a variety of forms and indicates a failure of our national being in the global film industry. I take a less despondent position. I question the importance of the hero, the fairytale of Hollywood cinema, and wonder if the anti-hero isn’t a more interesting character to portray and explore, as well as being more authentic. We use quotes to make our points and evidence our arguments. Our presentation aims to provoke you; we want to hear what you think.

[Play clip from *Mad Max I* [1981 George Miller] (around 0:00:48mins) starting where Max climbs the stairs to the Chief. ‘Chief, that’s what I came to say: “I’m through.”’ MacCree shakes his head, ‘You’re a winner, Max. You’re on the top shelf and I’m not going to lose you because of some crazy sense of losing. People don’t believe in heroes anymore. But you and me Max, we’ll give them back their heroes.’]

**BRENDA:**
‘People don’t believe in heroes anymore…but you and me Max, we’ll give them back their heroes…’ Western literature abounds with heroes. They are the stuff of ancient myth and have travelled throughout time to become the mainstay of contemporary story. And, just as MacCree recognised the need for heroes in Mad Max’s post-modern wilderness, there’s a critical need for heroes in every culture to enable people to positively locate themselves within the culture and to represent that culture in the manifestation of intellectual and artistic achievement.

Robert Graves (1959) states myth is necessary ‘to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs’. We know that myths develop as culture spreads and that they serve as dramatic shorthand to record events such as invasions, migrations, and dynastic changes and as admissions of foreign cults and social reforms. Myth is ever evolving and it is the storytellers who grapple with and express those cultural events and mysteries. It is the storytellers who determine how the main players will be represented.

Down the ages, heroes in legends and histories have inspired and supported little and big people to achieve great feats. When we interviewed him, Russell Porter talked about a discussion he had with Joseph Campbell’s disciple, Christopher Vogler (1999). Porter described the American narrative tradition:

In Act I a whole bunch of people arrive at Plymouth Rock. And they get the Call to Adventure to go west. What they’re looking for is the Land of Hope and Glory. They run up over the Appalachians and then they meet a Nemesis, some grizzly bears or some Indians there to nock them on the head. But they get over that. And they go down into the great second act of the film, which is the Western Plains. They build towards the climax, the great obstacle of the Rockies, a geological thing. But when they do finally overcome this last blizzard ridden, wild, almost insurmountable obstacle they are in California! And they have the pay off — part of their national consciousness and legend.

ANITRA:
As we interviewed Russell Porter in the function room of AFTRS in Melbourne, he gestured at the feature film posters round the walls: Bourke and Wills (1985 Graeme Clifford), Breaker Morant (1980 Bruce Beresford), Ned Kelly (1970 Tony Richardson), The Lighthorsemen (1987 Simon Wincer) and Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975 Peter
Weir). All of those films expressed a similar obsessive storyline as in many Australian documentaries. And he asked:

*What’s the equivalent journey for us? — Bourke and Wills get a couple of hundred blokes and a few dozen camels and they go looking for an Inland Sea. And not only is it not there but they all snuff it. But we’re all wiser for the journey! We make all these films about heroic attempts at failure!*

**BRENDA:**
Exactly!

**ANITRA:**
Exactly what? Russell Porter knows what it’s about:

*In Australian stories there are no answers. You just head into the Wilderness and you disappear. It’s about landscape, which is really wonderful. Landscape has illuminated our storytelling culture.*

Remember? He talked about the American distributors’ watching *Picnic at Hanging Rock* engrossed in wonderment till the end. Then they were angry, Porter said:

*‘That’s not a Goddam resolution!’ they cried. They wanted to know ‘the answer’. Of course, ‘the great thing about Australia is that there are no answers.*

**BRENDA:**
I find it interesting that a political documentary filmmaker like Russell Porter should think ‘no answer’ is great. What a despondent post-modernist view. It clearly reflects my argument that in Australia we don’t want to succeed. We don’t want to change. We are used to disappearing into the landscape.

**ANITRA:**
There’s another good point, in my opinion that Russell Porter made: ‘We are a country of exiles.’ And what does the landscape do? It humbles you. It’s not yielding. Steve Thomas saw migrating to Australia as a way to reinvent himself and, unconsciously, he became a classic Australian storyteller! His documentary *The
Hillmen—a Soccer Fable (1996) is an ensemble piece: its about migrants, its about colonisers, its about the daily grind, its about losers. And, it won awards!

BRENDA:
But SBS TV were reluctant to show it, initially, because once he’d finished it the team that he’d followed all season didn’t win! And while Steve talks about reinventing himself and you say he became a classic Australian storyteller, I suggest that it is the nature — the mindset — of the individual storyteller that determines the timbre of the story. Think of Hippocrates’ Four Humours: phlegmatic, melancholic, sanguine and choleric. There is a propensity to perpetuate the individual mindset and the national mindset. We are a melancholic nation. We were convicts. This was not a country born of choice and bright hope for the future but a place of despair and dislocation from the homeland. There was no pot of gold for us at the end of the rainbow. It was already in our psyche that we were losers.

Porter also said that all of this: ‘has reduced us to non-hero kinds of stories.’ And when we interviewed Cliff Green, who wrote the script for Picnic at Hanging Rock, he spoke of ‘instinctively’ creating ‘recessive heroes’. He is perpetuating the national mindset in creating men who are not superheros. There is a marvellous example in one of Cliff’s films, Break of Day (1977 Ken Hannam), where the soldier ‘hero’ deliberately shoots himself in the foot. Interestingly however, the recessive hero counterpart, according to Cliff Green is ‘the strong woman’. The men are weeds!

ANITRA:
Oh, so you just hate men who stand there with no expression on their faces!

BRENDA:
Well I must say I prefer the strong women — they are heroic. Sadly, it’s the patriarchal domination of the means of production and the tradition of Western literature that just keeps them smouldering as support characters. But it was Lawrence Johnston who raised that point about men with no expression on their faces. He was referring to a lack of definition in our Australian portrayal of character in that the wants and needs of the characters are not clearly defined. He said that in American films:
when somebody feels something, they feel it and you see it. It shows on people’s faces, unlike the stoic Australian kinds of faces that are standing looking off into the distance, not revealing anything.

And he suggested that while that is fine in real life, for cinema ‘you need to see someone’s face and you need to read it’.

Lawrence Johnston understands the importance of stories that work as a contrived narrative with a set-up and pay-offs. These stories — and he uses Scarlett O’Hara (Vivien Leigh) in Gone With the Wind (1939 Victor Fleming) as an example of a character with decisive needs and wants — keep the audience engaged. They are a crucial aspect of cinematic art. And for me they inform a culture rather than just mirror it.

Lawrence also talked about the relative immaturity of Australia compared to the rest of the world where history is more established and people are educated to be more competitive. He felt that we were ‘a bit furry around the edges’ and not committed to the outcome, with a ‘It’ll be right on the night’ attitude: ‘If they get the girl in the end… maybe they do maybe they don’t.’ He would like to see filmmakers becoming more focused with the set-ups and pay-offs and not going off at tangents. He recommended establishing the structure before the side issues are addressed.

ANITRA:
But the heroes’ journey is a formula. Often it’s fallacious and idealist. It presents order where order does not exist; most people’s lives are chaotic discontinuous narratives. There is an alternative even for dramatic features, for instance, the ensemble genre. I think that unconventional narratives reveal more about our reality. They’re not necessarily less mythological. Dennis K. Smith revealed to us that his favourite documentary was the one about the famous cartoonist, The Robert Crumb Documentary (1994 Terry Zwigoff). He sees that documentary as an exploration of genius. Under the pretence of a Crumb biography he explores genius through an ensemble of characters: Crumb’s lovers, mother and his brothers. For Dennis K. Smith, the brothers stand for how society deals with genius: one is acknowledged, but another goes mad and the other suicides.

BRENDA:
And, according to Vogler (1999) every one of those characters is the hero of their own story. If that had been an Australian documentary, they all would have perished. In addition, as Porter points out, there would have been a celebration. The classic Australian story is not just about the recessive hero, it’s also provincial and banal — ‘It’s a celebration of banality.’

Lawrence Johnston says in the 1970s and 1980s our films were still characterised by ‘adolescence, in negative speak like, “Where are we?”’ He says we need to be more confident in our storytelling to take ourselves seriously.

ANITRA:
But isn’t that desire, for heroes, a desire to achieve in conventional terms? Mac Gudgeon, who wrote the telemovie *The Petrov Affair* (1978 Michael Carson) stated clearly to us, ‘We don’t even want a hero class.’ Mac talked about the tension between producers and directors, between financiers and creative talent. Also the fact that in 2000 Australia spent about a sixth of what Americans spent proportionally on script development, demonstrating the poor status and resources for writers in this country. And he castigated the globalisation of American culture — ‘turning everywhere into Beverley Hills’ — and the importance of Australian resistance. Now, with the Free Trade Agreement, we’re deregulating further. So there is the danger of only one kind of successful cinematic story. As Gudgeon has said more recently and publicly (AWG e-mail): ‘We will become a branch office for “Hollywood Inc.”’

BRENDA:
This goes back to Australia’s historical immaturity. We are such a young nation. If we had of had the chance to define our culture clearly, more positively, we wouldn’t be in danger of being dominated. Do you think France or Germany or even the U.K. for that matter feel threatened by ‘Hollywood Inc.’? They are secure in who they are, they have a long history to support that, particularly in literature.

ANITRA:
But this is political for me! What is egalitarian about the hero? I want no heroes or everyone to be a hero. And I want stories that speak authentically about my experiences and the people I see around me. Lawrence Johnston, thought that his subject in *Eternity* (1994) was ‘not of our culture’ yet Arthur Stace a man who goes out secretly to chalk ‘ETERNITY’ on the streets of Sydney for decades on end till his
death was of our culture, a dogged fighter in the night, a surreptitious performer, a man who’d leave his mark not quite in a way you would expect! *Eternity* was an Australian story—a philosophical statement of plugging away relentlessly and *Eternity* was heralded by Australians and won international awards.

The structure or narrative of a documentary is character-driven plot. The stories and their characters are intertwined. If you insist on heroes’ stories, only the stories of so-called heroes will be created. In sport, heroes are the people who win. In politics and the arts, who are the winners? It’s up for interpretation. But, anyway, a minor elite wins.

For instance Dennis K. Smith talked about a responsibility to direct documentaries about the marginalised, people with disabilities for instance, to help them present their experiences in their own words and terms, as authentic experiences of our society. Such ‘outsiders’ intrigued Dennis; ‘I like the slight absurdity of that moment of making the small person big.’ He talked about the underdog as a metaphor for a greater universal film. We are not gods. We are all mortals, however godlike Bush and others believe themselves. That is the subtext. Even an anti-hero lives out a powerful tale in and of itself.

**BRENDA:**
And it’s heroic. *Rainbow Bird and Monster Man* [Smith] was heroic.

**ANITRA:**
Yes, it’s a heroes’ journey kind of anti-hero story. Alan Hopgood says, ‘the little guy wins by taking the mickey out of the pretentious guy.’ The anti-hero, from my point of view, is a reality check against blind patriotism and their stories are authentic. I prefer to discard Hollywood idealisms. The Australian tradition of insubordination is a complex response to authoritarianism; it shows consciousness, it is analytical and it addresses a challenge in a constructive even if in a gloomy kind of way. To quote from Alan Hopgood:

*The Tall Poppy thing is, ‘Come on mate. Look we’re all in the same boat. So you’re up there for a while. But you won’t be up there long.’*

**BRENDA:**
I’m with you regarding blind patriotism. Augusto Boal, in his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), contests the value of Aristotle’s tragedy and suggests that its main function was to render politics as the sovereign art and to provide a system of coercion. Well, I believe there are many Hollywood films that do just that. And that is why I am particularly attached to documentary, Australian documentary and the more independent the better. But the danger is in throwing out the baby with the bath water. In keeping the antihero as the reality check, we don’t grow.

Karin Altmann referred to ‘the axes that filmmakers have to grind’ as being their motivation because the pay’s so lousy. It’s here that I see a chance of creating a new culture rather than perpetuating the limiting one we have. The Tall Poppy Syndrome is a case in point. Alan Hopgood told us about writers and actors having to re-prove themselves with each job. It is such a counter-productive exercise; no one can ever win. So, instead of having to re-prove ourselves as writers and filmmakers, we can reinvent ourselves both artistically and as a nation.

**ANITRA:**
Brenda, when we talked to Karin Altmann, she contrasted American and Australian film narrative traditions in terms of ‘the Hollywood hero myth as a lie’. Karin said:

> America, historically and philosophically, is absolutely bound up in the notion of the individual being capable of making choices that permits ‘the individual’ to prevail… the Australian story is much more about the group. The Australian mythology is not about one character prevailing; Australian heroes stand up for what they believe in and they die!

**BRENDA:**
I believe all story is about the group because in the larger picture, the group survives even though individuals don’t. As we go through the hero’s journey, we identify with him or her as able to overcome obstacles or to overcome hubris or whatever. But *then* — and perhaps this is not what Hollywood portrays sufficiently — it is the affect that that action/victory has on the group that makes it egalitarian. Everyone is a part of the winning. Like how we all win when Ian Thorpe gets a gold medal. Culture consists of the monuments to excellence. And it’s so easy to see in sport. But in our film and our literature it’s not readily visible.
Michael Brindley, who collaborates on scripts with Karin Altmann, talked about the dominant Australian character being ‘the little guy who strikes back, insults authority …mostly with jokes and who is a part of the great Australian tradition of insubordination’ and what astounds me is that’s been going on for two hundred years! I feel that if we don’t make hero stories more in Australia then we will always remain the ‘little battler’ and while that is cute, it came out of the convict consciousness and has remained ingrained as a cultural identity.

ANITRA:
I rest my case that if it’s authentic it is the most legitimate characterisation and story to play with. Also, in line with this sentiment I suggest that the more recent documentaries that span a range of biographies and themes are not rigidly following either hero or anti-hero lines — they are, you might say, ‘beyond the hero’.

BRENDA:
David Malouf, in his 1998 ABC Boyer Lecture The Making of the Australian Consciousness (1998: 45) discussed how:

> we remake the land in our own image so that it comes in time to reflect both the industry and the imagination of its makers…an image both of our human nature and our power.

I put it to you that it is not just our land that we create in our own image but the whole of our culture. We perpetuate our images. Changing a culture’s perception of itself simply begins with story. No one complains about Luke Skywalker in Starwars (1997 George Lucas) being a winner, it’s just ‘not Australian’. As I said before, we do it through sport — we have sporting heroes that rock up to the Olympic Games and we love it when they get the gold. But when an Australian gets the gold for a film, for Shine [1996, Scott Hicks] say, it’s for a film that celebrates madness and losers or, with Harvey Krumpet [2003, Adam Elliott] for being small.

Could it be that our writers are dinosaurs? They write it not only as it is, but how they are comfortable with it being because that’s the way it’s always been. They are writers for goodness sake they could write anything and at least something more inspiring!
Take feminism, it wasn’t until Germaine Greer started writing about it that we were empowered by it and made it a part of our consciousness. Traditionally, literature has been the leader but there’s no reason why it can’t be film. For me one of the great moments in Australian film was in *Holy Smoke* (1999 Jane Campion) when Jane Campion had Harvie Keitel in the red dress lying in our humble-making landscape under the platform shoes of Kate Winslett. Campion had made a winner and it was a woman. She was creating a change in our culture on many levels. Sadly, Campion is now making films in America.

**ANITRA:**
Yes, but there you are — again the strong woman humiliating the man! What I really don’t like about your line is that you’re still talking in the framework of winners and losers. What I like, particularly about the documentary form, is that it tends to be more multidimensional than features. Dennis K. Smith talks of documentaries as ‘open forms’. Features, unless they are written in the ensemble form, conspire an identity with the main character, whereas many documentaries consciously display at least two ways of interpreting one event, issue or character to juxtapose views — ‘you can take the audience on a journey and allow them to a certain extent to make up their own mind.’ Dennis doesn’t like to push a nationalist cart. He sees the outsider within the western tradition and beyond the nation. And he talks about the outsider as a hero, a kind of hero that doesn’t succeed in conventional terms but who displays guts their loyalty to their journey.

**BRENDA:**
I worked on the making of *One Night The Moon* (2001 Rachel Perkins) and while it was created as a feature, it originated from a documentary about Tracker Riley. John Romeril was the writer and in the interview on the DVD he talks about how we are perpetuating the insanity of this country in not recognising and learning from the traditional owners.

*One Night The Moon* operates as a forum. People are left to interpret the event. I’m very pleased to say that *One Night The Moon* has been a critical success all over the world but, has it changed the Australian consciousness? The story is tragic. It’s what always happens. And perhaps in that we are as guilty as Aristotle in upholding the dominant political position. The real storytellers in our land are those we somewhat
arrogantly refer to as the outsiders. They are the insiders and they are not us. They are the traditional owners.

And over the last two hundred years they haven’t succeeded in conventional terms but their journey has displayed guts and it has affected the greater ‘whole.’ In the 1970’s, the Aboriginal people made a well-considered decision to tell the world about themselves. They did it through story, through their paintings. They recreated themselves through ritual and the expression of their heroes. Their heroes are not gods. They are not untouchable. They are living breathing entities that walk the land not only in the past, but in a parallel existence in which they inform the present and the future. Heroes are part of the Dreaming.

In the last twenty years, the most acclaimed international art movement has been the Aboriginal Art movement and with it the concept of The Dreaming has entered world consciousness. The Dreaming could be described as bringing something into existence much in the same way as Malouf (1998) talks of writing something into existence. And now, little by little, indigenous Australians have written themselves into drama and in film. They are recreating themselves. The process will be wonderful to watch.

But the reckoning could come if they choose to follow the dominant white storytelling inclination rather than their own cultural approach. But I am hopeful that this could offer a glimpse of an Australian culture of the future—a culture from the imagination. It is dreaming and The Dreaming is embedded in the Australian psyche. Archie Weller calls the cinema ‘White Man Dreaming’. It has the potential to be the beginning of a new history and a new culture, not only for indigenous Australians but also for all of us.

ANITRA:
Well I wouldn’t argue that a future where white reconciles with the black is one I would like to embrace. It reminds me of scene from Sally Riley and Archie Weller’s Confessions of a Head Hunter.

[Clip from short film Confessions of a Head Hunter [2000, Sally Riley] towards the end where the head of the statue of Captain Cook is sawn off.]
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BIOGRAPHIES
Brenda Addie (MusicArt Dance Films) and Anitra Nelson (RMIT University) began collaborating while completing the Advanced Diploma of Professional Screen Writing at RMIT. Anitra (Mercury Stole My Fire 2004, The Rhythm and the Line 1999) has taught Latin American history through film at LaTrobe University, has written documentary film study guides for the ATOM Metro Magazine. Brenda is a postgraduate at Melbourne University, assisted in the production of the award winning *One Night The Moon* and was development manager for the soon-to-be-released *The Widower*. The project that the paper is based on includes profiles of screenwriters that are being published in Metro.
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