

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This thesis has narrated the biography of the documentary video and the ideas that informed and guided the changing processes of its making. In conclusion I return to the introduction and the bodies of scholarship set out there and reflect on what light this film and its making can throw on these schools of thought. Framed slightly differently, I ask what difference this film, its making and its documentation in this thesis has made to my understanding of the concepts on which I drew. In short, what theoretical difference does this thesis make? In addressing this question I discuss, in turn, each body of scholarship as set out in the Introduction.

1. History of the Book

The biography of 'The Medicine Bag' narrative was constructed using segments and considerations from a variety of texts generated by the medicine bag, ranging from the initial discussions, the research and production interviews, transcriptions and audio-visual materials. By tracking this circuit of communication, as a filmmaker, I became far more aware of how intricately interwoven the social and cultural considerations that each participant brought to the project along each step of the way was and also of the resultant impact on 'the text'. It became apparent how, sometimes roughly but often delicately, ripple effects that were generated as ideas and thoughts fermented, grew and found expression to subsequently impose themselves on the next generation of texts

required for progression of the production and how these impositions necessitated and stimulated new ways of interacting with the material and interrogating the motives of the players. And as the process required interaction by participants from diverse cultural backgrounds with different degrees of literacy, the intersection between orality and literacy became a vital consideration.

2. Orality and Literacy

This was the first documentary film that I have produced that relied almost exclusively on oral accounts and also one of the few productions with funding for a proper research trip with preliminary location searches and interviews and the experience shifted many of my perceptions profoundly. From nearly abandoning the project because of a personal misunderstanding of the fluidity of memory and of oral accounts, I came to realise how rich and revealing these variations were when looked at in the context of the storytellers, their social and cultural standing, their background and the milieu in which these interactions took place.

It became obvious that at the heart of these misunderstandings was the assumption that once something was written or recorded as an audio-visual interview; it was set in stone and contained the 'truth'. It also became evident that the participants who adapted their oral accounts were in no way contradicting any previously recorded 'truths', but rather that the shifts were indications of how the added value gained by the recording process inspired them to reconsider previously held notions of their heritage and their identity as members of their cultural group and the South African nation in the post-apartheid

South African era; they became involved in shaping and writing their own history – not as it was, but as how they would like it to be. According to Cynthia Brown's guidelines on how to record and interpret oral accounts, the accounts are 'not a lawyer's brief, not even an objective sociological treatise, it is a personal account of a personal truth'.¹ It may make a contribution to objective history, but someone will evaluate that later; that job is not up to you'.² An important insight in this regard was the realisation that there was no need to pass judgement on the accounts because as Brown puts it, 'the account is true to your narrator and whether it is true in some other sense may not matter much'. She advises the recorders of oral accounts to carefully avoid one's own opinions and readings, except for the unavoidable decision of what sections you include or exclude.

Duncan Brown writes that 'The text must be seen in terms of the signifying systems of its society, both in the source language and in the target language',³ and for me the process of translation from one medium into another, whether from oral account to text or from text to audio-visual text, should be scrutinised with the same vigilance. I became aware of how looking at the 'signifying systems' of the society in which the medicine bag resided and the 'society' in which the documentary film was recorded, and analysis of the newly generated public spheres became an accessible and handy tool for the process of producing documentary films.

¹ Brown Cynthia (78)

² Brown Cynthia, (78)

³ Brown (12)

4. Texts and Public spheres

It seemed that these publics both contributed and detracted from the recording process. The diverse cultural backgrounds and language abilities at times hindered effective communication and interaction between the crew and the social actors. Yet, these divides also erected unexpected barriers which required a different, often more lateral solution as the ensuing discussions presented various ways of perception as alternatives.

3. Documentary filmmaking as text production

Although I read widely in order to enhance my understanding of documentary production and analysis to fathom the challenges of the medicine bag production process, (and many of the classifications according to Nichols and even Bruzzi's new approach, drawn up after exposing the flaws in Nichol's system,) the most useful ideas originated in writings that interrogate the blurring of boundaries between films of 'wish-fulfilment' and those of 'social representation'. The writings on the necessity of intervention by the filmmaker also contributed greatly to my understanding of the unfolding medicine bag production process and filmmaking as a new media source of text production. Although intervention is inevitable, the degree and the ethical approach to the involvement was a crucial aspect and depended upon the approach of all the participants; the social actors, and the production crew involved in all the stages of narrative construction. Giannetti quotes the well-known filmmaker Albert Maisels on the tension that exists between content and form, probably the main source of stress and

inspiration between the social players and the crew, in *Understanding Movies* as follows:

‘We can see two kinds of truth here. One is in the raw material, which is the footage, the kind of truth that you get in literature in the diary form – it is the immediate, no one has tampered with. Then there is the other kind of truth that comes in extracting and juxtaposing the raw material into a more meaningful and coherent storytelling form, which finally can be said to be more than just raw data. In a way, the interests of the people in shooting and the people editing (even if it’s the same individual) are in conflict with one another, because the raw material does not want to be shaped. It wants to maintain its truthfulness. One discipline says that if you begin to put it into another form, you’re going to lose some of the veracity. The other discipline says that if you don’t let me put this into a form, no one is going to see it and the element of truth in the raw material will never reach the audience with any impact, with any artistry, or whatever. So there are these things, which are in conflict with one another and the thing is to put it all together, deriving the best from both. It comes almost to an argument of content and form, and you can’t do one without the other.’⁴

The completed documentary text or narrative took shape as a join effort of many participants canvassed from the diverse South African cultural composition, based on a unique previously un-text-ed historical event, invoking a series of challenging issues and questions and contributing to a fairly unique and thought-provoking production

⁴ Giannetti (342)

process. The process also generated various archival items relating to the Schwartz family and their heritage.

5. Text as archive

Various elements from the newly created archive, constructed during the production process, have been integrated into this report or are in safe keeping at the Wits School of Arts Television audio-visual archive. This document includes the research report, a documentary video, an editing script, photographs and a selection of summarised transcriptions. This collection of multi-media 'texts' generated by the process of producing a documentary video has become an archive for the family and for future researchers and the material will be made available for inclusion at the new Origins Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand and at selected schools in the Northern Cape.

For me the archive reflects an attempt at this time in our history to preserve what was available and pertinent. Before the advent of colonialism, the medicine bag contained only herbs and 'gure', now the bag has Dutch traditional remedies, blades and dice. In future, with members of the family trained in Western Medicine and traditional methods, the contents and the skills may change yet again. The researcher, the archivist and the storyteller have to be on a constant alert to incorporate changes over time and as our cultural and political positions change realise that the frozen image or the typed page can never reveal an ultimate truth. What we collected were fragments from the past, fragments from the present and, possibly, potential fragments from the future.

This process has enriched my understanding of research and filmmaking in a South African context and should encourage all participants in this field to enhance their skills, tools and understanding of these undertakings which ‘at its best [it] posits answers in terms of a dialectical relationship between changing consciousness and social, political and economic movements’⁵ or as Debray writes rather poetically that ‘he (sic) enters *into* the landscape of meaning and modify its architecture’⁶ aspects of a process that I attempted to understand and to apply.

⁵ Alice Kessler Harris writing in Grele (3)

⁶ Debray (145)