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Documentary film and the poetics of history

ABSTRACT

How do documentary film-makers picture the past and in what ways does their approach differ from the orthodox writing of history? In this article I draw upon my own experience as a documentary film-maker to explore a broader set of issues concerned with the relationship between academic history and factual film-making. Does the history documentary as found on television involve a 'dumbing down' of historical understanding? Or does it, as I suggest, encourage a form of historiographic practice that is more reflexive, experimental and critically aware of its own auspices. In reflecting on a range of my own broadcast work I seek to illuminate some of the ways contemporary documentary film-makers have engaged with the past and in so doing expanded the language of documentary film and of historical narration.

KEYWORDS

documentary film
history
practice-based research
reflective analysis

INTRODUCTION

While documentary films addressing historical topics have always been a staple of public service broadcasting, now within the proliferating world of cable and satellite television, we have specialist channels such as *History Channel* exclusively concerned with history programming and a number of others such as *Biography*, *Discovery* and *National Geographic* with a substantial percentage of such programming. Historians regularly appear in front of the camera introducing these programmes and act as consultants on them. But, is the historical documentary a populist form that necessarily involves the 'dumbing down' of academic history? Or, can the inclusion of historical documentary material

- 1 Survey data gathered in Australia and the United States suggests that in these societies, at least, 81 per cent of the population rated film and television as their primary source of historical information, with only 53 per cent identifying a print source. See J. Warren-Findlay (2003), 'History in new words: Survey results in the United States and Australia', *Australian Cultural History*, 23, pp. 43–52.

within the television schedule extend access to historical understanding to a broader range of people than the specialist texts of academic, written history?¹

In this article I do not seek to provide a definitive answer to these questions nor do I present a comprehensive review of contemporary documentary practice and its approach to the representation of history. Instead, I seek to illuminate the issues that I think are involved by drawing upon my own work as a documentary film-maker concerned with exploring Irish history. Hopefully, my reflections on that work may enable the reader to explore some of the ways that film- and programme-makers have dealt with problems of historical representation and narrative. The films discussed here are my own. They 'do' a certain sort of history. Through a reflective analysis of my work in 'history film', I seek to tease out the distinctive manner in which documentary film-makers approach history.

METHODOLOGY

Over the last number of years, in collaboration with my editors Roger Buck and more recently Simon Hipkins, I have developed an archivally based, creative documentary practice that seeks to explore aspects of Ireland's post-Famine past, including the Irish diaspora. *Rotha Mór an tSaoil/The Hard Road to Klondike* (Bell, 1999) drew on a rich reservoir of early film material, both actuality and fictional in character in order to retell the classic Irish emigrant story of Mícheál MacGiobhan's tramp through frontier America to the Yukon. *Rebel Frontier* (Bell, 2004) employed a similar archival strategy, combined now with live action re-enactment, to retell the story of the Irish and Finnish miners of Butte, Montana, and their struggle against the Anaconda Copper Mining Company during World War I. This film, narrated by actor Martin Sheen, employed the additional device of the 'unreliable narrator'. The story of the momentous events unfolding in Butte is told from the perspective of a Pinkerton agent sent to break the miners' strike. This might be a young Dashiell Hammett and the script draws upon Hammett's 1926 novel *Red Harvest* set in Butte. *Tachrán Gan Todhchaí/Child of the Dead End* (Bell 2009) deals with the life and work of Donegal-born navy poet and writer Patrick Mac Gill. It also employs a rich corpus of archival images alongside dramatic elements somewhat more elaborate than those found in the earlier films.

These films have been heralded for their use of archive that has been recognized as quite distinctive within documentary film-making in Ireland, in particular, in so far as they employ early cinema material as an expressive and storytelling resource employing the conventions of continuity editing in cutting this footage (Mac Conghail 1999: 25). For some time I have been seeking to make sense of my own creative documentary work and its use of archive material as both historical trace and as narrative resource exploited to engage with the past (Bell 2004). Hopefully, these reflections might illuminate the broader issues around documentary film as historiographical practice raised in this article.

Needless to say my methodological approach is that of a practitioner concerned with illuminating the creative and critical auspices of my own work rather than that of a film theorist per se. Film-making is always an exploration and testing of ideas about the medium, its creative capacities and its mode of public address. However, any attempt to theoretically extrapolate

from one's own experience of a creative project is always likely to be tentative and partial. And, of course film-makers are in the first instance primarily concerned with the production of an art object rather than with a 'research outcome'. That said, one of the challenges of practice-based research and indeed of art as public culture is to encourage artists to engage in reflective analysis that can be shared with an interested public. Can the film-maker/researcher render explicit the forms of tacit knowledge implicit in their practice by engaging in a structured reflection on that practice, the process Jurgen Habermas (1974) calls *Nachkonstruktion*, a term perhaps best rendered as *rational reconstruction*?

I would argue that one of the most useful approaches to practice-based research in the film and the media field is one that respects the autonomy of the anterior creative practice ('making work') but that promotes the *rational reconstruction* and interrogation of a body of professionally organized practice as a rich source of 'data' and understanding.²

As I have argued elsewhere (Bell 2006), this mode of reflective understanding may well be arrived at in a pedagogic encounter – explaining our work to others – and is perhaps best communicated to other practitioners in such a context rather than by so-called 'research dissemination'. Those of us who work in a university environment as teachers of film in a sense contract into pursuing our creative practice within a context of critical accountability. This entails seeking to more fully know our practice by engaging in an a posteriori reconstruction of it in which we seek to tease out the rule systems that govern that practice and our understanding of it.

Needless to say, this is not the model of practice-based research favoured by the research councils who seem intent on bending the creative process to the demands of a set of homogenized, pseudo-scientific research protocols (governed as much by norms of bureaucratic accountability than by epistemic concerns). It is not at all clear to me what is gained by forcing practice-based researchers – whether masters and doctoral candidates or project researchers – to adopt the alien language of 'research questions' and replicable 'methodologies' in their work. The studio and production process has its own discipline and research dynamic. Practice-based research is not another generic method of research alongside, for instance, ethnographic, semiotic, historical analysis, of cultural production. Rather, it is an integral element of good arts practice. The cognitive interest is exercised through reflective analysis and the critical appropriation of a creative process that has its own expressive dynamic.

We still have relatively few contemporary exemplars of practice-based research based on reflective analysis. Sue Clayton's recent illuminating longitudinal review of her film work (Clayton 2007) certainly points in the right direction, as does Gideon Koppel's discussion of the making of his creative documentary film *Sleep Furiously* (2008).

Unfortunately the notion of self-reflection currently employed in the current discourse of practice-based research remains unclear and often fails to distinguish clearly between *reflexivity* and *reflection*.

The terms 'reflexivity' or 'self-reflexive' are much employed in cultural studies and in critical discussion of experimental and documentary film practice. They seek to identify a disposition on the part of the researcher/practitioner to become aware of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process.

2 As I have argued elsewhere (Bell 2006), the author's reflective analysis is but one interpretative position with regard to a film work always subject to the scrutiny of other critical positions.

The notion of reflexivity seeks to acknowledge

the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research.

(Nightingale and Cromby 1999: 228)

Advocates of practice-based research have often been enthusiasts for an ethos of reflexivity. Very often such research takes place around a creative project designed primarily to advance our knowledge of a designated research topic rather than as an intrinsic work of art. Much doctoral work is of this character, and a concern with reflexivity on the part of the student/investigator seems a vital part of such practice-based research, as it is of any enlightened research practice in the arts and humanities.

However, much practice-based research conducted within the academy is not so conceived and is concerned with creative work produced for purposes other than research – namely as a professional outcome intended for exhibition to an audience. Work produced within a professional setting and primarily for exhibition to a general audience can of course become the object of subsequent systematic reflection, and this is the basis of this article. My own work, for example, is produced within the commercial strictures of public service television. It is written, shot and cut with a popular audience in mind rather than for a group of my academic peers. Indeed it is precisely this professional context that provides the 'well founded laboratory' within which an academic-practitioner can explore the formation of filmic practice in both its aesthetic and institutional dimensions through reflective analysis.

Social scientists have found it useful to distinguish between two types of reflexivity – *personal reflexivity* and *epistemological reflexivity*. The former involves a disposition to reflect

upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers.

(Willig 2001: 10)

Reflective analysis by a film-maker will often involve an exercise in personal reflexivity as they seek to reveal the manifestation of subject position in their work – whether expressed in the point of view adopted in a film or in the imprint of personal experience in its treatment.

Epistemological reflexivity, on the other hand, involves a disposition to engage with the methodological and theoretical auspices of our research practice and its construction as a rule-governed activity. In the case of practice-based research in film and the visual arts, this engagement often takes the form of *rational reconstruction* of the process of production and its context. A distinct filmic text is available for interrogation as is the process of its production and the researcher as author has a measure of privileged access to process and product. On the other hand, the demands of epistemological reflexivity require that their reflections be aligned with a range of critical issues.

This distinction between personal and epistemological reflexivity can, I think, be usefully related to Jürgen Habermas's attempt in his classic text *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1974) to delineate the *critical* character of self-reflection as a mode of knowing quite different from the protocols of science. Habermas, ever the rationalist, is concerned to distinguish between the deeply personal forms of self-reflection – found for instance in the psychoanalytic encounter – and what he calls *rational reconstruction*. The former is concerned with grasping the processes of self-formation of the individual, while the latter involves modes of reflection concerned primarily with cognitive outcomes.

Self-reflection brings to consciousness those determinants of a self-formative process of cultivation and spiritual formation (*Bildung*) which ideologically determine a contemporary praxis of action and the conception of the world. (Psycho) analytical memory thus embraces the particulars, the specific course of self-formation of an individual.

As he notes (Habermas 1974: 22), psychoanalytical dialogue does not in itself produce rational discourse and, 'reflection on oneself does not produce reasoned justification'. Something more beyond the personal act of reflection is required

What is reasoned justification within the context of acts of reflection on oneself bases itself on theoretical knowledge which has been gained independently of the reflection on oneself, namely, the rational reconstruction of rule systems which we have to master if we wish to process experience cognitively or participate in systems of action or carry on discourse.

Rational reconstruction can be contrasted with personal reflection in so far as the former seeks to deal with anonymous rule systems or rational norms. Any subject can comply with these norms, if they have acquired the corresponding competence with respect to the rules.³

My approach in this article is one of attempted 'rational reconstruction'. In discussing a corpus of work produced over a twenty-year period, I have chosen to focus on four issues within contemporary documentary practice that seem to be having historiographical import:

- the status of re-enactment within the historical documentary and the related topic of the relation between the factual and fictive elements in the non-fiction film;
- the use of archive and found footage in historical documentaries;
- the role and character of the voice-over within the documentary film and related notions of authority and truth in the narration of history; and
- the engagement of the documentary film with personal and collective memory as historical source.

THE HISTORIANS AND FILM

From the outset let us admit that historians have a deep suspicion towards the notion that film-making might represent a methodologically valid way to 'do' history. Historians' distrust of the historical accuracy of film is most pronounced

³ Habermas acknowledges that critical theories of reflection, 'have not adequately distinguished posterior reconstruction (*Nachkonstruktion*) from reflection on oneself'. More generally, Habermas argues that critical theory must guard against over-burdening the concepts of the philosophy of reflection that it has taken over. The concept of *reflexivity* introduced into contemporary cultural studies seems to be precisely one such loan concept and involves the over-extension of essentially idealist premises about self-hood and cognition into the sphere of social relations.

- 4 This scepticism has a long history. Chicago historian Louis Gottschalk wrote in 1935 to the president of MGM, David Selznick, to complain about the low quality of historical films and the need for scholarly consultants in order to make them more accurate.
- 5 The name of the Soviet news reel group founded by film-maker Dziga Vertov in 1924.
- 6 The term somewhat misleadingly is used to refer to both the US tradition of observation cinema associated with Drew Associates and to the French documentarist Jean Rouch, who himself associates it with Vertov's work.
- 7 In a positivist age it suited many of the early proponents of documentary film to focus on the photographic basis of the form and to treat the photographic process as the unproblematic inscription of reality. This was so despite the importance of filmic rhetoric (and artifice) throughout the development of the genre. One has only to think of the visual pyrotechnics of Dziga Vertov, or the elaborate stagings and fabulism of Robert Flaherty, of the poetical lyricism of a Basil Wright or a Cavalcanti, or the 'cinema provocations' of Jean Rouch, to realize how constructed a medium documentary film has always been.
- 8 Grierson was primarily concerned with distinguishing the documentary film from, on the one hand, the broader

in their assessment of fictional film genres – the costume drama, historical romance, the epic or memorialized historical event. Their scepticism partly rests on the popularizing aspect of film and television. Both media strive to produce simple narratives, often based on personal stories manufactured for a mass audience. Historians are often askance at the resulting cavalier attitude of film directors and television producers with regard to questions of historical detail⁴ and continue to decry Hollywood's determination to remould the past within the contours of the action movie in films like *Gladiator* (Scott, 2002), *Troy* (Peterson, 2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott, 2005), *300* (Synder, 2007) and a range of other movies that roam over ancient history to produce what humourist Joe Queenan (2009) recently christened, 'Faux-Quasi-Centurion Neo-Feudal Merovingian Ultra-Hyborean Men of Yore Action Flicks'.

What then of film works that purport to be factual in character? How does documentary film fare in the eyes of historians? Documentary film, as Bill Nichols has observed (2001), has generally operated within 'a discourse of sobriety'. That is to say it has developed beyond the razzmatazz of the Hollywood fantasy factory and in a critical relation to commercial studio film production. Documentary film stakes its claims on its unflinching engagement with 'life as it is'. It is *Kino Pravda*,⁵ *cinema vérité*,⁶ *direct cinema*, *observational cinema* – the documentation and analysis of everyday life captured by the camera. The dilemma of the documentarist remains how to reconcile the commitment to accurately record and report upon real events with a desire to give their film work expressive force and narrative drive.⁷ John Grierson captured this dilemma perfectly in his classic definition of documentary as the 'creative treatment of actuality'.⁸

Historians and documentarists by and large share a commitment to an ethic of public communication with its attendant notion of truth and impartiality. However, historians remain suspicious of the epistemological status and cultural role of documentary film. Many have concerns about the evidential status of the forms of personal testimony and narrative revelation that documentary films often rely upon. Many are uncomfortable with the notion of memory as a constitutive concept within historiography. On the other hand, many historians remain oblivious to the mediated and contingent nature of collective memory that has so fascinated film-makers. And this is so despite the development of oral history approaches within their discipline and the increasing use of visual sources and media contents as historical data. Significantly, the debate about *popular memory* and the intersection of power and historical knowledge has been largely conducted outside the confines of academic history.⁹ Labour history has sought to give voice to the marginalized and occluded within the traditional historical record and to extend data gathering into the realms of audio and video recording of oral testimony. But these remain marginal methodological preoccupations within a discipline still focused on the written text and statistical table as preferred evidential sources.

Historians after all regard history as a profession. Their discipline has its own standards of proof and of methodological consistency and accompanying practices of training and professional socialization. From this perspective the historical documentary can look like an applied and, let's face it, 'second-rate' form of doing history. Dependent for its factual accuracy on the mother discipline, the historical documentary film is viewed as an act of dissemination of previously accredited historical knowledge via an untrustworthy mass medium. It functions as the documentary does in the public communication of science. Accordingly, contemporary historians are generally more at ease with what

Nichols has identified as the *expository documentary* – films with an authoritative voice-over or presentation to camera from a historian acting as narrator and objective assessor of evidence – than they are with creative or authored documentary modes that seek to problematize historical knowledge and visual evidence.

However, to fully understand the scepticism of the historians towards film, I think, we have to understand what has shaped the contemporary practice of researching and writing history. So permit me a diversion.

Somewhat over ninety years ago history as a discipline experienced what Jacques Rancière has identified as its ‘Copernican revolution’ (1994). The writing of history up to that point had largely been focused on monarchs and diplomats, treaties and wars. With the emergence of the *Annales* school of historians,¹⁰ history strove to break from this sole focus on the textual records provided by elites and from the writing of authoritative narratives based on such records. The *Annalistes* – initially in France, but very quickly elsewhere across Europe – sought to model history on the emergent social sciences of economics, demography, sociology, human geography and anthropology. If these new domains could lay claim to the status of science, then surely the venerable discipline of history could do likewise?

But history from its classical origins in ancient Greece has always been about storytelling and its truth claims intimately bound up with the efficacy of the narratives deployed by the writer. However, with the drive in the late nineteenth century to establish the scientific character of history, the reinvigorated discipline sought to distance itself from narrative and literary considerations.

History in the twentieth century – economic, social, cultural, political – increasingly becomes the province of the professional specialist. Such an expert was now conversant with statistical methodologies and data tabulations. They were anxious to distance the discipline from its literary functions and storytelling origins. In particular, history sought to put clear water between itself and the historical novel or romance – the literary form in which broad swathes of the population consume history in the nineteenth century. Roll the argument forward another 50 years or so to the filmic innovations of DW Griffiths¹¹ and it is in relation to the narrative and descriptive practices of film – now coming to dominate the market for popular accounts of the past – that history must realign itself.

It is then in this context of the scientific aspirations of history as a discipline and the emergence of film as an epic mode of narration of the past that we can begin to understand the resistance of historians to filmic takes on the past whether factual or fictive.

Well and good. But as Rancière reminds us, history has found it hard to do away with words or to abandon narrative form. Indeed to do so would involve a reduction of history to the contributory disciplines of the various human sciences that the *Annalistes* lionized: demography and social statistics, geography, sociology and anthropology. In other words, the baby would go out with the bathwater.¹²

This meant preserving the power of storytelling within the historical enterprise and re-engaging with a field of literature itself experiencing the revolution in writing wrought by modernist practice. Rancière’s argument is that even as it moved into its post-literary, quasi-scientific guise, history had to come to terms with a practice of realist and modernist literature. This is a practice with an aesthetic that in Hayden White’s words (Rancière 1994), ‘laid claim to the status of a kind of knowledge every bit as “realistic”, rigorous, and self-critical

field of factual film-making (educational, scientific, health, public informational film etc.) and, on the other, fictional and dramatic films. The differentiating feature of the documentary for him is the capacity of the film-maker to bring a creative treatment, employing all the tools of cinema, to bear on their subject matter.

9 In France, the debate was closely associated with the attack led by the historians attached to the Communist Party on revisionism and historical erasure and the failure of contemporary historians to address French collaboration with the Nazis during the occupation in World War II. Other intellectuals outside the party such as Michel Foucault (1996) contributed to this. There is a real fight going on. Over what? Over what we can roughly describe as popular memory. Its an actual fact that people – I’m talking about those who are barred from writing, from producing their books themselves, from drawing up their own historical accounts – that these people never less have a way of recording history, or remembering it, of keeping it fresh and using it () a whole tradition of struggles transmitted orally, or in writing or in songs, etc.

10 The group of French historians clustered around the journal *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*. The school has been highly influential in setting the agenda for historiography in France and indeed across Europe since World War I. The *Annalistes* championed the use of social scientific methods by

historians and a concentration on social, cultural and economic subject matter rather than political or diplomatic themes. They encouraged the idea that history could be written 'from below' rather than be simply an account of political elites; although as Rancière points, many of the *Annalistes* were uncomfortable with the radical implications of this departure.

as either science or history'. Rancière despite the intense interest in the filmic image displayed in some of his other writing (2006, 2007) does not in an earlier text like *The Names of History* discuss the impact of the evolution of cinema on the writing of history. Nor does he address how the emergent language of film, with its photographic verisimilitude and complex handling of time and space, shaped historiography. However, Rancière does offer us what he calls a 'poetics of history' – a critical consideration of history's literary practices in relationship to a broader field of cultural production and I think that the term is a useful one in reconsidering the relation between history and film.¹³

HISTORIANS AND THE CAMERA

The scepticism of historians towards film and television has not of course inhibited them from offering their services as historical consultants to programme-makers tackling historical subjects. Within the BBC model of the historical documentary, which generally follows the expository mode, the historical consultant functions as a source of 'quality control'. S/he (and they are mainly men) is brought on-board to oversee and underwrite the authenticity of the programme content in accordance with the existing state of historical knowledge. Within this Reithian¹⁴ inspired model, historians do not need to know much – or indeed anything – about the programme production process. Nor do they need to be aware of the formal features of film. They are hired to vouch for the historical credentials of the piece and that is all.

The historians who actually appear in front of camera in historical documentaries (and they are a chosen few) have approached the challenge of televising history largely from a pedagogic standpoint. Most operate with a model of broadcast documentary as a form of illustrated lecture. The historian/presenter marshals his/her arguments before the camera and illuminates these employing the visual resources television can make available. The great masters of this genre such as AJP Taylor and Kenneth Clarke produced spell-binding performances to camera in a simpler television age. Today Simon Schama has assumed the mantle of the 'history man'. Besides writing the scripts of the series he has been involved with,¹⁵ Schama has also had a significant input into other aspects of some of these productions, including the choice of locations and elements of visualization strategy.¹⁶ Unlike Taylor and Clarke, Schama in his films has to deal with the indignity of large sections of dramatic reconstruction where out-of-work actors and hapless extras are directed to show us how things looked, felt and indeed *were* in 'olden times'.

Documentarists remain divided (Nichols 1991: 176) about the validity of re-enactment within factual film-making.

Reenactments risk implying greater truth-value for the *re-created* event than it deserves when it is merely an imitation or copy of what has already happened once and for all.

The problem, as Nichols reminds, is that documentary film in its contract with its audience vouches to represent *the* world and not just a fictional construction of *a* world given flesh in the diegesis and design of a film. Yet no matter how thorough our historical research, in the absence of surviving testimony or visual records we can only represent the distant (pre-photographic) past by making a series of assumptions about it through a filmic diegesis.

- 11 Griffith is usually attributed with pioneering the development of narrative cinema. Many of his films addressed historical themes and in works like *Birth of Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) he displays a propensity towards an epic treatment of historical content.
- 12 The more clear sighted of the *Annalistes*, such as Braudel and Le Roy Ladurie, recognized that the rigours of the new social sciences would have to be reconciled with the narrative practices of literature if history was to avoid the fate of becoming merely a branch of social science offering a longitudinal analysis of social data.
- 13 Rancière asks how history balances its narrative, scientific and political tasks, offering not so much a sociology of historical knowledge as an identification of the literary procedures by which historical discourse seeks to escape literature and claim the status of a science.

This *hypothetical history* works – if it works at all – not because the director sticks to the facts (under the watchful eye of the historian) but because s/he effectively abandons them. They do so in favour of the imaginative logic of the fiction film and the willing suspension of disbelief. In other words directors settle for a form of coherent verisimilitude that has little to do with the observational practices of documentary film-making and everything to do with the realist codes of the nineteenth-century novel and the twentieth-century ones of the historical ‘costume’ drama. I will call this approach found in many historical documentaries ‘unreconstructed reconstruction’. The introduction of such ‘well-dressed’ fictive elements into a documentary film can be a destabilizing one. The desire to achieve the ‘look’ of the past and to hypothesize how people dressed, talked and behaved peddles the illusion that we as audience can directly access the past through the photographic power of the filmic medium. It offer us the illusion that the screen can be an unmediated window on the past showing us ‘how it really was’.

Re-enacting history

I have to admit I have not been immune to the allure of rhetorical performance to camera, nor from ‘unreconstructed reconstruction’. However there are other ways to do dramatic reconstructions of past events. My first film, *We’ll Fight and No Surrender: Ulster Loyalism and the Protestant Sense of History* (Bell, 1989a), and two later ones, *Redeeming History* (Bell, 1989b) and *Out of Loyal Ulster* (Bell, 2002b), sought to engage with popular senses of history in Ireland and their role in the construction of contemporary collective identities.¹⁷

We’ll Fight at one point involves a ‘reconstruction’ of the iconic moment in Loyalist history when the fabled twelve apprentice boys of Derry rushed forward to slam the gates of the city in the face of the advancing Jacobite army in December 1688, thereby committing the Protestants of Ulster to the Williamite cause.

We ‘monkeyed around’ with the ‘parts’. During the shoot a number of unemployed Catholic young men habitually hung around the walls killing time. We asked them to ‘perform’ the shutting of the gates event by closing a modern security gate erected by the British army within the original Magazine Gate of the city to control vehicular access to the commercial centre of Derry in the context of the IRA bombing campaign of the period. This ‘live action’ material was then intercut with footage shot at a later date of Loyalist bands parading at a ‘Relief of Derry’ commemorative parade (Figure 1).

We see the bandsmen advancing in full regalia towards New Gate, which leads into the historic centre of the city. In our treatment, the Loyalists ‘play the part’ of the besieging Jacobite forces while the defenders of the ‘Maiden City’ are played by the nationalist youth in an ironic reversal of traditional roles.

I guess we were seeking to make past and present collide – not I might add in the reassuring formula of Irish revisionist historiography where the professional historian exposes the mythic status and folly of popular and ideologically charged versions of history, Loyalist or Republican, but in a dialectical manner. This strategy quickly took the film-maker beyond the faux naturalism of costume drama.

In *Redeeming History*, commissioned by Channel Four Television in 1989, we invited a group of Protestant six form pupils from a school in Derry to explore aspects of a radical Protestant tradition. The film explores the period of the Volunteer movement (just prior to the French Revolution). It plots, in particular,

- 14 As in John Reith (1889–1971), first director general of the BBC and leading proponent of public service broadcasting.
- 15 Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (5 episodes 2006), *A History of Britain* (11 episodes 2000–2002).
- 16 Interestingly, Schama has said that he saw his writing task on the series he has worked on as akin to providing a screenplay.
- 17 All of these films were either acquired or commissioned by Channel Four Television at a time at which the channel has a serious interest in exploring the historical dimensions of the ‘Irish problem’. The best discussion on television history and Ireland remains Bob Ferguson’s 1985 monograph.

18 The term has been used to characterize the assertions of political independence for Ireland made by and for the benefit of a protestant propertied class from 1690 to 1798 (see Cleary 2002).

19 On 10 November 1783, the Grand National Convention of the Volunteer delegate met in the Rotunda, Dublin, under the presidency of the Earl of Charlemont. During this time, the claim of the Catholics to vote at elections was advanced by their self-appointed champion Frederick Augustus Hervey, Earl of Bristol and Protestant Bishop of Derry.



the political career of one the Volunteer leaders, the enigmatic Earl Bishop of Derry, Frederick Augustus Hervey (1730–1803). As the young people got further into the story of what we can call for want of a better term *Protestant* or *creole nationalism*,¹⁸ they discover the difficulties the ‘Protestant Patriots’ had in accommodating the democratic requirement of Catholic Emancipation within their demands for political autonomy for Ireland. As the project developed, significant differences of opinion appeared within the group of students. These appeared to relate to contemporary political anxieties within the Protestant community. In a key sequence in the film we explored Hervey’s failed attempt to convince his fellow Volunteers at the national convention of the movement to support Catholic Emancipation.¹⁹

Radically different filmic elements are brought together to narrate this key episode in Irish history: contemporary footage of a St Patrick’s Day Parade in Dublin; heated discussions amongst the pupils on the question of political identity; and contemporary republican terrorism. Hervey’s speech to the Convention is delivered by actor Stan Townsend. This performance is intercut with contemporary footage of the loyalist Apprentice Boys of Derry burning an effigy of the iconic traitor to the Loyalist cause, Robert Lundy, as they do every December. Through montage, past and present, historical fact and myth, ethnographic observation and fabulation are brought into an expressive alignment. History is grasped as a process of investigation that can lead to communal self-questioning. Our engagement with the past reveals the anxieties and interests of the present.

Historian Robert Rosenstone (1995: 76) argues that the experimental history film is a distinctive way of doing history.

Rather than opening a window directly onto the past (it) opens a window onto a different way of *thinking* about the past. The aim is not to tell everything, but to point to past events, or to converse about history, or to show why history should be meaningful to people in the present.

To 'converse about history' [...] 'to make it meaningful' [...] could these not be common aims for the historian and the film-maker?

Historians however remain stubbornly empiricist in their methods. Their preoccupation remains one of establishing the facts and the facts are seen as embodied in written documents and statistical tables rather than in oral witness or visual sources, such as photographs and film clips.

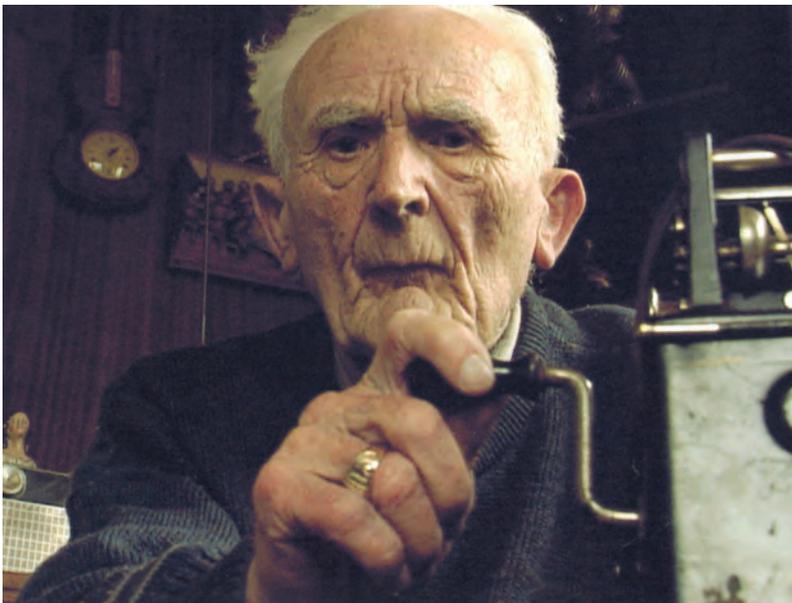
Rosenstone identifies the chirographic bias of traditional historiography (1995: 77). As he argues,

The challenge of film to history, of the visual culture to the written culture, may be like the challenge of written history tradition, of Herodotus and Thucydides to the tellers of historical tales.

Documentary film with its power to provide personal witness and to explore memory through our visual archives has contributed to re-establishing the new centrality of the oral and the visual as sources for 'doing history'. Indeed, this may perhaps be its abiding contribution to the sort of postmodern historiography Rosenstone envisages.

In my film *An Scealaí Deirenach/The Last Storyteller* (Bell, 2002), I explored the role of oral record and visual archive in exploring folk memory. This film, made in both English and Irish, follows the life of veteran Irish folklore collector Sean Ó hEochaidh, who died in 1992 (Figure 2).

The film deals with the eclipse of traditional storytelling within Gaelic culture in the twentieth century. It also muses on how filmic language – including the evocative power of moving image archive – might provide a new resource for the retelling of folk tales and for the exploration of myth as communal narrative. The film retells a number of the classic folk tales Sean collected in Donegal



from the 1930s. In one of these – *The Cobbler and His Wife* – fiction footage elements – from Brian Desmond Hurst's 1935 version of *Riders to the Sea* – are combined with documentary footage of a 1940s Irish market town and with contemporary live action cinematography to retell this story. We explore Donegal folk ways and interrogate myth. Such is the stuff of anthropology I hear the historians saying.

Indeed anthropology as a discipline has been more open to the challenge of film. Ethnographic film may have started off its life as a mode of illustrating the 'scientific findings' produced by traditional fieldwork writing – a more modern form of the lecturer's lantern show. However, it soon evolved into a genre much more attentive to the formal features of filmic language and alert to the complex dynamics that the introduction of camera produces in any social encounter. The subject position and cultural location of the ethnographer as well as that of his/her informants now have to be factored into any field encounter. As Marcus Banks (1999) has reported, a lively synergy now operates between visual anthropology, media studies and documentary film-making. Indeed social anthropologists like Banks have acknowledged that lens-based practice has transformed their discipline, undermining positivist certitudes and encouraging a new spirit of reflexivity and ethical engagement on the part of researchers.

Traditional historians remain sceptical of such methodological manoeuvres. The discipline has been resistant to any 'postmodernist moment'. In general, historians are not known for their self-reflexivity, nor for their propensity for sustained consideration of their writing practices and the roles these play in the production of historical truth.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE AS HISTORICAL SOURCE AND NARRATIVE RESOURCE

One area where the conversation between historians and film-makers might usefully begin is around the use and interpretation of the archival image. The picture archives, still and moving, serve both as testimony to past events available to the historian and as an expressive resource for visual storytelling for film-makers.

Film theorist Joachim Paech (1989: 59) reminds us of the preservative power of the archival image, 'The ephemeral historical moment becomes a permanent presence in the moving image in these archives of history.' The photographic image, still or moving, as Bazin observed (1981), embalms or mummifies history providing in its visual trace a 'second degree original'. The traditional television documentary often operates under journalistic auspices. As within traditional historiography, photographic sources are treated as transparent to the historical reality they purport to depict. But these evidential claims rest on a particular limited understanding of the photographic process. In Paech's words, 'The signifying material has to become invisible in favour of the intensified visibility of the signified' (1989: 58). The photograph opens like a window on the past.

Indeed the indexical character of the photographic image is seen to underwrite the documentary film's claim to facticity. The photographic image signals the presence of the camera on the scene at the historical moment of image capture. Digitalization may be changing all this, and certainly the expanded

opportunities of image manipulation render the evidential status of the photographic image much more problematic. We have long been aware of the possibilities of artifice in photographic practice, in the use of the airbrush and in the cropping of the print, but also in the camera point of view and in the editorial decisions and occlusions of the operator. Digital manipulation – the term is a tautology of course – greatly expands the capacity for departures from the veridical.

For the creative documentarist, particularly those working in the tradition of found footage film-making, the archival image is as much about memory as about evidence. And in relation to memory, the photographic image (still or moving) is a fragmentary survival from the past.

In developing her analysis of found footage film-making and its forms of montage, Catherine Russell (1999: 240) draws upon Walter Benjamin's theorization of memory as an aesthetic of ruins and traces. The ruin for Benjamin is both the most material and most symbolically powerful form of the allegorization of history. Its fragments are testimony to what has gone before but are also indicative of a loss that can never be repaired. The photograph is like a ruin, in that it is always an incomplete record of what it purports to represent. The photographic document has to be read and this requires a critical engagement at the level of representation. Benjamin's analysis, Russell believes, offers a critical solution to one of the recurrent problems faced by post-structuralist thought, 'how to theorize cultural memory without mystifying it as an original site' (Russell 1999: 8). The found footage film does not seek to offer the immediate, indexical access to the past promised by the original photographic sources from which it is assembled. For in the found footage film the images are all mixed up. Combined together under a montage principle, they establish a different sort of relationship with the past to the denotational claims made for the individual photographic image. The relationship of archival element to historical event becomes a figurative rather than referential one. For Russell (1999:238),

Its intertextuality is always also an allegory of history, a montage of memory trace which the film maker engages with the past through recall, retrieval, and recycling.

Accordingly,

The complex relation to the real that unfolds in found footage film making lies somewhere between documentary and fictional modes of representation opening up a very different means of representing culture.

So historians beware! With the photographic image all is not always what it seems. In the found footage film, the complexity of the archival image becomes apparent. We have to attend not only to the *denotative* aspects of the image, what it points to in the world that it depicts, but also to its *connotative* elements, its meaning as a cultural statement and its construction through technological, cultural and representational process.

With this health warning in mind – how should we deal with this stockpile of images that both documentarists and historians pore over and use? Are these to be treated as primary evidence and mute testimony to an unattainable past or as narrative resource capable of releasing the submerged voices of history and of attending to their story?

20 This term has been invoked by historian of early cinema Tom Gunning (1989) to refer to the works of the very early or 'primitive' cinema where spectacle and spectatorship were at the core of the public's fascination with the novelty of the moving image.

ARCHIVE IN THE CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY

Consider the use of archive in my film *Hard Road to Klondike*. And, in particular, in one of the core sequences in the film portraying the arrival of Donegal emigrant Micí Mac Gabhann in New York in the 1890s on-board an emigrant ship. This montage involves fictional elements, period actualities of New York (from the Edison paper print collection), short varieties of staged incidents (from the same source) and live action footage seeking to capture the historical resonances in the contemporary metropolis. As in other found footage films, no attempt is made to discriminate between these different sorts of footage by the use of any framing or titling device (although at one point the sound track with its dubbed sound of a cine projector at work does explicitly invite the audience to peep into a 'cinema of attractions'²⁰).

The archive material is not used here as it is in many television documentaries to illustrate a didactic argument primarily established through an authoritative voice-over provided by a historian. Stephen Rea voices Mac Gabhann's story from a script adapted from the book and this is employed as the film's central narrative thread. He does so in an 'actorly' manner, lifting the narration to a level of subtlety where voice, image and sound track resonate in an evocative manner creating a diegetic space somewhere between fact and fiction.

Nor is the archive material used as evidence of a now gone 'way of life'. Indeed the use of the archive is on occasions not strictly bound by concerns with complete historical and geographical accuracy (Mac Gabhann's early life was lived before the advent of film, and the moving image material assembled to cover this part of his story is from a much later period, much of it from the 1934 film of the Aran Islands, *Aran of the Saints*).

Is the film-maker guilty of playing free and easy with documentary sources? Is he involved in some sleight of hand in this blurring of the boundaries of fact and fiction in the choice of the archival mix?

I would see *Klondike* as falling within a tradition of 'found footage' film-making as discussed by Ross. As Beattie (2008: 82) tells us, the found footage or compilation film is one where,

The found footage film-maker may combine nonfictional images selected from sources as varied as commercial stock footage, newsreels, home movies and fiction footage to construct an argument about the socio-historical world.

This sort of film has its origins in a set of avant-garde visual practices based on the found object, on the method of collage and on early theories of film montage. Traditional television documentary film-making of course habitually uses archive but it does so largely to illustrate other elements such as interviews and voice-over. In general it does not share the concerns of the found footage film-maker with problematizing the sources it uses. Nor is it concerned with making the compilation of the material and its *retournaage* an aesthetic end in itself, as is the case with film-makers like Bill Morrison, in his film *Decasia* (2002) or Peter Forgács, in his *Free Fall* (1996), who slow down, reframe and manipulate the footage they use to achieve expressive effect.

The found footage film does not seek then to offer the immediate, indexical access to the past promised by the original photographic sources from which it is assembled. In the found footage film, the images are all



mixed up. For example, Mac Giobhan abandoned by his companions in the frozen waste of the Yukon falls asleep and has a feverish dream in which images of his home, of a love abandoned and of a hovering eagle merge (Figure 3).

The elements used here are 1930s archive footage of Curraghs off the Kerry coastline, a clip from William S. Hart's 1915 Alaskan adventure, *The Darkening Trail* and 1980s television archive of a raven in flight in the Yukon. Combined together under a montage principle, they establish a different sort of relationship with the past to the denotational claims made for the individual photographic image. The relationship of archival element to historical event becomes a *figurative* rather than a referential one. Found footage film-making lies somewhere between documentary and fictional modes of representation as it does between documentary practice and that of the avant-garde film-maker. It offers a critical reading of history and its sources. As Keith Beattie (2008: 85) argues,

In this way, metacommentary and historiography are implicated within a process in which source or 'found footage' is interrogated via filmic collage to release functional and valuable ambiguities inherent in the footage.

Thus *The Hard Road to Klondike* seeks to remain faithful to a traditional practice of storytelling while drawing on the figurative powers of the photographic image and the critical practices of found footage film-making. The film recasts the autobiographical recollections of one particular migrant worker and his passage to the new world. Míic Mac Gabhann's story is a thoroughly modernist one speaking as it does to a wider experience of colonized peoples and of diaspora. Mac Gabhann's distinctive story speaks then to a wider experience

- 21 Mac Gabhann's capacity as a storyteller in *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* lies in his ability to lift his narrative out of the sentimental reminiscence of the emigrant. His story addresses issues of solidarity and difference between his historical experience as a Gael and that of the Indians marginalized by miner-settlers such as himself. See, Luke Gibbons (2005), 'We knew their plight well', *Third Text*, 19: 5, pp. 555–66.
- 22 Frank Little was the full-time organizer for the syndicalist labour union the Industrial Workers of the World and was lynched in Butte Montana in June 1917 in the midst of the miners' strike there. A copy of a remarkable photograph of his semi-naked body laid out in the morgue is still displayed in the Silver Dollar Saloon in the town and the original of this was part of the exhibition *Without Sanctuary* shown at the *Rencontres de Photographie* in Arles in summer of 2009 (the image is used in my film).

of colonized peoples not only through the account of his passage to the new world but also in his relationship to the Native American peoples he encounters in Montana and later in the Yukon. In turn, our treatment and its use of found footage casts Mac Gabhann's story²¹ in broader terms in so far as the archival photography employed once freed from its indexical 'obligations' can function figuratively to paint a bigger picture.

Rebel Frontier is also a story of diaspora – in this case the attempt by emigrant Irish and Finnish workers to bring distinctively European traditions of radicalism (nationalism, socialism and syndicalism) into the US labour movement at a pivotal moment in the class struggle in America. However, the film plays the evidential power of the archival image off against the fictive possibilities of the 'unreliable narrator'. Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961) had a short career as a Pinkerton agent before emerging as a writer. He appears to have been in Butte, Montana, during the labour disturbances that occurred there during World War I. Later he drew upon this experience in the writing of his classic detective novel *Red Harvest* (1926) also set in Butte, though at a slightly later period.

In the film we 'embody' the voice-over (provided by Martin Sheen) in the persona of a Pinkerton agent who identifies himself as 'Abraham Byrne'. Byrne tells us he has been sent to Butte to spy for the Anaconda Copper Company.

ABRAHAM BYRNE (VO) And who am I you may ask? You can call me Abraham Byrne, in 1917 just 22 years old, fresh out of Baltimore and eager for a slice of the action. Up to then my work for the agency had been pretty routine stuff, matrimonial and missing person cases. This I reckoned was gonna be different.

Byrne appears fleetingly before the camera throughout the film but his presence is established primarily through his voice-over. The agent looks back over the tumultuous events that took place in Butte and on occasions – such as the lynching of World War I activist Frank Little²² – is revealed as a possible participant in these events.

However, the mythic character of Hammett's involvement is identified from the outset by a number of interviewees who in a montage of contributions make clear to us that we may be dealing with rumour, hearsay and legend – in short the 'contingency of memory' – rather than with attested historical fact.

MARK ROSS: Dashiell came to Butte in 1917 as an operative for the Pinkerton Detective Agency which had been hired by the Anaconda Company to keep an eye on the miners[. . .]in the labour unrest that was happening at that time here in town.

DAVE EMMONS: Pinkerton was the favourite agency of the Company by that time and amongst the spies who worked here during those years was Dashiell Hammett

KEVIN SHANNON: We know Dashiell Hammett was offered \$5,000[. . .] you know who Hammet was[. . .] eh?

JERRY CALVERT: He was employed as a private detective and that formed the basis of his detective fiction later on[. . .].

The narrator Abraham Byrne can then only but be regarded as a potentially unreliable one. He may or may not represent Dashiell Hammett. He may or



may not be giving us an accurate account of his activities in Butte. The historical record is unclear and the narration reflects that.

Throughout the film the interviewees bring us back to the historical record and to a popular memory of the labour struggles in Butte. Interviewee Jacky Corr brandishes a print of the funeral of lynched World War I activist Frank Little and reminds us that lynching is ‘not un-American’ (Figure 4).

The reconstruction of the lynching in the film is based on the reported testimony of the witnesses of the time. The problematizing of the narrative voice aims not to relativize the truth of this shocking incident but to alert the viewer to the contingency of memory and the fallibility of documentary report.

Most of us are aware of the negative portrayal within documentary film criticism of the ‘voice of God’ narration typically found within much of the documentary output of television. This voice is often didactic in tone, authoritative in manner and expository in form. In the historical documentary it is often the voice of the historian as lecturer. Voice-over does not have to be like this, it can problematize truth and authority claims – as in the case of Abraham Byrne in *Rebel Frontier*.

Stella Bruzzi in the context of a discussion of the work of experimental documentarist Chris Marker draws our attention to,

the various ways in which the classic voice-over has been modified and its rules transgressed through the insertion of ironic detachment between image and sound, the reflexive treatment of the narration tradition and the subversion of the archtypical solid male narrator.

(2000: 40)

Certainly in all three compilation films of mine discussed here I quite consciously sought to depart from a ‘voice of God’ narration in favour of a voice-over that had more in common with the ‘inner monologue’ found in fiction film-making. Here the voice-over often is used to reveal a person’s inner thoughts and motivations. These can often be ironic and contradictory (although the voice-over can also be asked to provide exposition and narrative

23 See Heather Holmes research (2002).

coherence). Certainly the impact of using a nuanced voice-over such as that found in *Rebel Frontier* is not only to destabilize the veracity of the narration (but not that of the sources) but also to create a different sort of relation of voice to archival image to that found in the traditional television documentary.

DOCUMENTING LIFE WRITING

Child of the Dead End addresses more directly the problem of evaluating the truth claims of life writing and the authority of narration. Its title sequence offers the viewer an exploration of 'the fact and fiction of the life of a writer' and signals that viewers will have to navigate between the two realms. Historians have rather assumed that Patrick Mac Gill's early novels, in particular, *Children of the Dead End* (1913) and *The Rat Pit* (1914), can be read as autobiographical accounts of Mac Gill's time as a navy in Scotland. Accordingly, the books are regarded as an important historical source for understanding the life of the migrant Irish in pre-World War I Scotland (Dudley Edwards, 1986).

I am not sure that is how Mac Gill saw his work. His first novels combine social documentation and Gothic narrative in equal measure (above all in the tragedy of Norah Ryan central to each book). I was clear that from the outset that our film would have to mirror the ambivalent handling of fact and fiction present in Mac Gill's work. Accordingly, the film archival sequences are segued into dramatic re-enactment of scenes from Mac Gill's books and vice versa. The original scene from the books may or may not portray events Mac Gill directly experienced. We simply do not know. Other scenes in the books are clearly fictive in nature and are presented as such in the film. Thus we fairly faithfully follow Mac Gill's account of the early life of his central character Dermot Flynn as a *spalpeen* in Ulster and the west of Scotland provided in *Children of the Dead End*. This element of the book is usually regarded as 'thinly disguised' autobiography not least because Mac Gill also rehearses this account in various newspapers interviews he gave. Moreover, his description of the life of the Irish itinerant labourer in Scotland in the first decade of the twentieth century is capable of some degree of verification with regard to the historical record.²³

However, with the introduction of the character Norah Ryan as Dermot's love interest in *Children of the Dead End* and as the main character in *The Rat Pit* (both books are narrated in the third person), we clearly move into the fictive realm. The account of Norah's doomed relationship with her fellow worker Dermot Flynn is only really intelligible within the tropes of the Victorian Gothic novel, although Mac Gill strives also towards social realist engagement with the lives of female migratory workers. How then to film a life revealed in a series of texts where social documentation and Gothic fable collide?

The story of Norah Ryan is presented as a series of live action re-enacted scenes drawn from *Children of the Dead End*. Dermot and Norah work together in the tatty fields. They fall in love. Dermot gambles away his wages. Norah goes off with a gentleman's son. She becomes pregnant and ends up in a Glasgow lodging house 'The Rat Pit' where her child is born. She enters a life of prostitution to support her son. Dermot searches for but then rejects Norah on discovering her new status. He leaves for London to take up a career as a writer. This entire plot unfolds through dramatic action intercut with archival sequences. Fictive means are employed to portray fiction material.

Our film then follows the real life of Patrick Mac Gill (available to us through various documentary sources) as he becomes a writer and begins drafting his

work no longer in navy bothies and model lodging houses but in St George's Library at Windsor Castle.²⁴

Originally I had intended to provide an interpretative context for Mac Gill's life and work by recording a series of interviews with a range of social and cultural historians capable of providing informed opinion on the broader social context within which Mac Gill wrote and discussed the fabric of his writing. This is a standard but useful television documentary didactic strategy. However, as the editing of the film progressed, it became clear to both my editor and me that much of the insight that could be gained from these recorded interviews had already been integrated into the elaboration of the dramatic elements. Moreover, the use of the archive assembled in the film could provide the most appropriate form of historical contextualization of Mac Gill's story.

The dramatic reconstructions in the film seek a congruence with the archival material used in the film. The intention here was not to try and elide the two and create the illusion of a window on the past. Rather, we sought to open up larger social issues as the drama plays out against a visual record of the time. The interweaving of the two strives to parallel the manner in which fact and fiction, documentary report and gothic fable mingle in Mac Gill's life writing, an admixture that proved very successful in helping him achieve realist outcomes as a writer.

As in my other films, the film is framed within a retrospective first-person narration. In this case the narrator, an elderly and infirm Mac Gill (played by Stephen Rea), is introduced to us on camera (Figure 5).

The old Mac Gill we encounter is now a failed writer living in Florida, circa 1957. He looks back on his life and tells his story directly to us the audience (that is he addresses the camera directly as in a documentary interview). This mode of address is used throughout the film by the various characters that appear and provide something akin to documentary witness. The range of material employed is similar to that found in the earlier films, although the re-enactment elements are more pronounced. The live action materials such as the archival clips serve to not only elaborate the narrative but raise questions about the truth status of Mac Gill's life writing.

24 In this we were greatly assisted by the discovery in the library of Worcester College, Oxford, of an important cache of letters from Mac Gill to his mentor in Windsor, Canon Sir John Neal Dalton. This revealed the extent of the debt of Mac Gill to Dalton who assisted him in editing his early books and in getting them published.



- 25 See Roberta McGrath's discussion of this collection in A. O'Brien and A. Grossman (eds) (2007) *Migration and Location: Transcultural Ethnographic Media Practice*, London: Wallflower Press.

In a direct address to the camera, old Mac Gill reveals the fictive status of Norah Ryan his character and reprises her story. He hints at the continuing hold this character and her story had over him as a young author struggling to make sense of his sudden elevation into the higher echelons of English society.

OLD MAC GILL I decided to return to Glasgow to research my second novel *The Rat Pit*. I needed to discover what had befallen Norah Ryan[. . .] OK there was no Norah Ryan! But there were hundreds of Norah Ryans[. . .] young innocent Irish girls driven into prostitution by poverty and desperation.

I came across many unfortunates like Norah during my time in Glasgow. These women – like the navvies – were treated like outcasts by 'respectable' society[. . .].

Rea's narration is dubbed over stills of female tenement dwellers in the Cowcaddens slums (one of which we have briefly seen earlier in the hands of young Mac Gill in Windsor). These shockingly intimate, indeed intrusive, images of woman and their children were taken in 1906 as part of the documentation of housing conditions in Glasgow and are now archived in the city's Mitchell Library²⁵ (Figure 6).

Present and past, indexical photographic trace and imaginative retelling, are brought into creative alignment in a manner that hopefully both moves the viewers and causes him/her to question what they are seeing and what the narrator is telling them. The collision of past and present and of different sorts of documentary images and sounds intermingled with fictive reconstruction seek to provide a critical interrogation of a key text dealing with Irish migrant experience.



CONCLUSION

Documentary film-making today is an exciting field of creative innovation where many of the key elements of practice – the archival image, the voice-over, the reconstructed sequence – are currently the subject of experimentation and critical discussion. The creative or performative documentary²⁶ is plotting new ways to narrate the past. In the found footage film, in particular, we can see the contrasting ways that historians and film-makers deal with picture archive resources. The former seek to privilege the photographic image as evidential source, while the latter seek to exploit the expressive and interrogative power of the found and manipulated image.

In reworking these archival resources in order to represent and interrogate history, creative documentary film-making is, I believe, doing important historiographical work. It both undermines objectivist historical accounts and encourages the viewer to actively engage with how we make sense of the past. In effect, I am arguing that if historians knew more about the language and production processes of film, then they might be more critical and reflexive about the ways in which history operates as discourse, including the challenge of how history might deal with visual evidence. I suggest that experimental or creative documentary film practice is the leading exemplar of what might be called a 'postmodern history': that is a representation of the past that is reflexive, multivocal and partial (in both senses of that word).

Filmic history encourages the discipline of history to reflect critically on its 'poetics' and on its contiguity with other practices of cultural production. Historians are having to think through their use of narrative, figurative trope and discursive strategy within the practices of writing and conceptualization they employ. History is also having to reflect on the role of subject position and ideological inflection in the production of the historical text. Such reflections are now commonplace in enlightened documentary film practice and indeed the interaction of history as a discipline with the practices of literature and of film production may be encouraging this development.

Hopefully this article provides a useful exemplar of a reflective analysis of film practice that can help to illuminate a range of critical issues around the place of documentary film within the 'poetics' of history.

After all, despite 70 years of social scientific aspiration, history remains what it always has been – an art of telling stories about the past. Perhaps it shares more in common with documentary film-making than it cares to admit.

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