

METRO MAGAZINE # 143: REPRESENTING (THE OTHER) REALITY:

Interpretive Interactionism and the documentary films of Nick Torrens.

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‘...There can be no doubt that the one characteristic of ‘reality’ is that it lacks essence. That is not to say it has no essence, but merely lacks it.’ Woody Allen.¹

The problem inherent in representing reality is the presumption that reality is tangible, definable and may be represented. Representing ‘the other’ reality - the other’s perspective of reality - is even more problematic, because the very act of representation demands an interpretation of, and therefore the distortion of, that reality. Over the last century the Social Sciences have debated the ethical problems of representing ‘the other’ with assiduity. A large volume of work is available to the student and social researcher on research methodology, interpretation, construction and the argument that notions of truth and reality are complexly negotiated assumptions or archaeologies of knowledge² which can not be fixed, but can only be traced through a process of ‘thick description’.³ Documentary filmmakers on the other hand, who are arguably at the cutting edge of representation, are rarely given the philosophical and methodological training or tools to construct representations of ‘the other’ reality which go beyond the techniques of filmmaking⁴; the institutional, market-driven demands of form and content via the increased dependence on television production⁵; or the analysis of style, structure and genre in relation to the burgeoning discipline of film theory⁶. Why is this the case, when so much practical and ethical advice is available from years of intellectual rigor in the social sciences? Bill Nichols’⁷ work pioneered a correlation between anthropology/ethnomethodology and documentary practice, but he is more concerned with the analysis of existing texts, than the approach to researching new projects.

In this article, I hope to introduce documentary filmmakers, students and teachers to *Interpretive Interactionism*, by Norman K. Denzin⁸. This work is both a practical and philosophical guide to qualitative research methodology that has immediate relevance to documentary film making. I will then look at some of the films of Australian documentary filmmaker Nick Torrens, whose work demonstrates a definite, though unconscious, correlation with the aims of Interpretive Interactionism.

Interpretive Interactionism

Interpretive Interactionism encompasses the ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger⁹/Gadamer¹⁰ and the Symbolic Interactionist approach to participant-observation and ethnography¹¹. It incorporates theories of semiotics, post-modern analysis, case study and creative interviewing in fieldwork. Its basic thesis lies in the assumption that interpretation and understanding are key features of social life; that 'everyday life revolves around persons interpreting and making judgements about their own and others' behaviours and experiences.'¹² Its basic tool is the personal biography of both researcher and the subjects involved. The researcher must place him/herself in the story, so to speak, with an acknowledged presence. It demands from the researcher a thorough and intimate knowledge of his/her subjects, either through personal involvement, or through a long period of association and participation. The approach encourages *multivoices*. It is not so much a commentary or 'inscription' by the researcher, but a 'contextualization'. This provides codes for meaningful interpretation to an ultimate audience outside of the experience itself, encouraging the audience to construct its own interpretation rather than the researcher present it to them.

Another important aspect of this methodology is the attempt to capture the experiences of individuals at a time when certain life experiences radically 'alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects'¹³. Described as 'epiphanies', Denzin argues that these highly charged times in a personal history not only highlight aspects of character, but also the multitude of social and ideological pressures working upon the individual at the time of the experience. For Denzin, the point of epiphany is the precise point where change occurs in a person's perspective of reality. That is, after the 'experience', the person is radically altered in some way and cannot return to the comfortable set of values and meanings once enjoyed.

The epiphany experience places the subject in an historical moment, which can look forward to the conclusion of the event, while looking back to the historical, gender, class, race, cultural, biographical and emotional conditions which led to the experience.¹⁴ The researcher's 'critical' role lies in his/her obligation to deconstruct the dominant and negotiated meanings which shape the context (and final text) of such experiences. Denzin suggests that there is an oppositional relationship between the dominant and negotiated meaning, which in effect leads to the epiphany itself. However, it is possible for negotiated meaning to sit undetected, and even protected from exposure by the unchallenged nature of dominant meaning, until a point of conflict - not

necessarily oppositional (protagonist-antagonist) but most commonly so - serves to point out that they are in fact two separate constructs.

In an earlier work Denzin¹⁵ argues that it is the obligation of the researcher to expose ideological 'archaeologies'¹⁶ in the context of the study, to expose not only the researcher's own field of thinking, but also that of key players in the drama of epiphany. Exposing an archaeology in research demands an acute curiosity about the *assumptions* both the researcher and 'the other' make about meaning, expectations and outcomes. The researcher should be particularly sensitive to subtle *differences* in such assumptions and reveal the subtle discourses or 'archeologies' which have led to such divergent assumptions. The challenge is then to faithfully construct representations of these differences for an audience to interpret.

Can this be done in the field? Is it possible to be critically aware of one's own assumptions about reality, and faithful to the other's reality at the same time? Denzin says yes, but the crucial factor for such detailed, critical exposition of 'the other' involves time and immersion in context. It requires time spent with people to gain trust, insight and a long and intimate investment in and understanding of all the complexities, assumptions and constructed meanings of their lives. All well and good, but can this long immersion in context, and engagement with the central tenets of Denzin's methodology be achieved within the realities of television documentary, with its increasing tendency towards magazine-style mapping? I believe it can, and will now look at a sample of work from Australian filmmaker Nick Torrens. Torrens' films address many of the concerns of Interpretive Interactionism, while also negotiating the changing parameters of production funding and changing broadcaster preferences.

The Documentary Films Of Nick Torrens

Although Nick Torrens was not schooled in Interpretive Interactionism, his approach to the material is highly consistent with the methodological concerns outlined by Denzin. In his substantial body of work, Torrens maintains an integrity to his material, seeking to unravel and expose the 'assumed' meanings which define his subject's expectations and environment. He then carefully constructs this material in a way that challenges the audience to define its own interpretation. Torrens' career has spanned almost 30 years, so it is not possible to cover all his films in this article. Rather, I will focus on a few works including the recently released *The Men Who Would Conquer China* (2004), outlining the essential elements which correlate to Denzin's methodology.

The first film I want to look at is *All that Glitters* (1982). This was the official film for the 1982 Commonwealth Games, commissioned by Film Australia under a strict Commonwealth Games

charter established in the 1930s. Given its official nature, one would expect a documentary in the expository mode, with a commentator promoting the glories of the Commonwealth and its principles. However, *All that Glitters* defies these expectations. There is no commentary, no official statement, rare official interviews and even these are predominantly taken from current affairs footage of the period. There is however, a statement at the beginning of the film that clearly outlines Torrens' approach and the aims of the film:

These were to observe, to contextualize (both the Games in their political environment, and the worlds and lives of the athletes themselves) and through personal stories, to provide an insight into the 'meaning' of these games for the athletes. With this statement, the filmmaker defines his relationship to his subject(s) and his audience. He has placed himself in the story and we understand that this film doesn't attempt to represent *truth* or *reality*, but the *contexts* and *meanings* of personal stories that are there for us, the audience to interpret.

Our first contextual experience as an audience is to see the political environment in which the Games will occur. Torrens' provides vision of land rights demonstrations and testimony by world media representatives that they will be covering the politics equally with the games proper. But there is no in depth reportage of the conditions of aboriginal people, what their demands are, or how this might affect the Games. Instead, we are shown exactly what the struggle is about by the focus on an individual whose relationship to the wider context has enormous personal and political poignancy.

Doug Sam, Australia's (Aboriginal) Middleweight Boxing Champion, works as a barman in a Queensland pub. He converses with a (white) client at the bar, smiling politely as he tolerates blatant racism and patronizing advice. Unlike the protesters outside the Games, Doug is conspicuously silent. He knows he is being patronised, but he also knows he has to keep his mouth shut, or his major ambition - winning gold - will be jeopardized. His is the voice that *knows* it is excluded from the discourse of power. What we have in this establishing sequence is the rich *contextualization* of the two major themes in the film. These themes are the political environment, and the personal struggle of athletes to overcome the everyday prejudices and problems in the supreme struggle for gold. Torrens has placed his first subject/actor in the wider sociological environment and shown his relationship to it. He has also highlighted the critical ideological and political differences that characterize this environment, without directly telling us what they are. Denzin calls this *temporal mapping*. As the audience, we make our own interpretation.

Torrens then structures the film around the personal stories¹⁷ of several key athletes who will participate in the games, all of whom share the single-minded ambition to win gold. Their

personal stories are richly contextualized by Torrens filming them in their various home countries and situations, eating with their families, training, socializing with friends, and at university or work. As each of the athletes tells us their story, we are aware that what separates them from us (the audience) and characterizes them as a unique group of people, is the enormous impact that the psychology of 'winning' has on their lives and attitudes. Their success as athletes is acknowledged by each of them personally, as well as by their families, friends and coaches, as almost totally determined by their psychological determination to *win*.

This film differs from other official sporting films because it asks questions about the 'archaeology' of winning. It carefully studies the difference between the assumed, dominant meaning of the concept 'to win', and the negotiated meaning it has for these athletes. For most audiences, the families of the athletes, and even for many within the sports community, the concept of winning is a powerful ideal. But for these athletes, the verb 'to win' has a different meaning. For them, 'to win' has been invested with everything from their time, their family/social life, their physical well-being and personal freedom, to nothing less than total psychological commitment. Torrens doesn't theorize this for us, but he does examine it, trace it and focus on it. As an audience, we understand through our own interpretation that there is in fact a difference between the assumed and negotiated meanings of 'winning'.¹⁸

Furthermore, it is the very meaning of 'winning' itself, which drives the personal narratives of our athletes, and the complex narrative of the film, towards the point of ultimate challenge - the 'epiphany', the 'plot point' - the 1982 Commonwealth Games. This is the reason we are here. Our road to it has been so rich and complex, that as an audience we now have a personal investment (outside nationalistic pride) in the fates of our protagonists. We care for them, we like them, we know their innermost fears and we want to see what happens to them; and we watch with hope. As audience, we witness their personal epiphanies, as these athletes either triumph or stumble at their point of highest challenge. Their lives are turned around, and we see them either re-negotiate the priorities that will give the 'losing' experience meaning, or we see their 'win' priorities affirmed with their sights set higher, and their dedication made even stronger.

The epiphany is, as discussed, one of the major features of Interpretive Interactionism and it is also an important feature in Torrens' impressive body of work. As in *All that Glitters*, Torrens' characteristically works from the personal stories of people, as told by them and captured on film, to reveal the larger sociological and historical contexts of the world in which they live. And he is intensely interested in that historical point where the wider sociological and political context of his subjects intrudes into the personal with such impact that some change in

perception is required by them in order to survive (or flourish) in the changing context of their lives.

This is the case in his 1985 film *Running from the Ghost*, a film that intimately observes the impact of British Colonial policies on the lives of struggling Chinese migrants. Torrens' observes two migrant families; one is being evicted from their condemned and illegal dwelling. The other family is comprised of illegal street hawkers and must constantly run from "the ghost", the Hong Kong license police, in order to avoid arrest. In this film, we get a very clear view of the way public policy has an impact on the intimate details of private lives, and how these separate families, must change the very nature of their lives if they wish to continue to survive as immigrants in Hong Kong.

Nearly fourteen years later, in *To Get Rich is Glorious* (1997), Torrens continues his fascination with Hong Kong. This film examines the impact of the Hong Kong hand-over from Britain to China in 1997, by focussing on how this historical event will affect the life of wealthy entrepreneur Vincent Lee. Vincent is the son of a Chinese immigrant who had successfully built up a multi-million dollar business in Hong Kong. Now the managing director of this business, Vincent anticipates the hand-over will mean more business opportunities in the newly capitalist China. Personally, Vincent expects the hand-over will give him a sense of national identity, where previously he confesses, he had been a citizen of the world. However, what these new business opportunities present to Vincent is that moment in his life when he must make a crucial choice about his future direction.

Under enormous historical and family pressure 'to achieve', we see this hitherto cheerful and enigmatic man in his moment of greatest struggle - with himself, his heritage and his future. In that epiphany, we understand the conflicting nature of business in the west vs the east and the conflicting pressures of Vincent's duty to his father vs his duty to himself and his young family. We also understand his conflicting allegiance to British Rule, which gave him wealth and security, vs allegiance to and faith in the uncertain, uncharted territory of Chinese rule. He reluctantly takes the bold step towards the future with his US business partner Mart Bakal. Together they spend two weeks in China with the aim of investing in companies there. Their quest is unsuccessful, but by the end of the trip, the die has been cast. There is no more uncertainty for Vincent. He will do what has to be done, and refocus his sights towards China.

Torrens' ability to capture Vincent's personal story at that historical moment, when world events impact on his life to the point of forcing a personal epiphany, makes this film an ideal example of the Interpretive Interactionist approach. This *epiphany* reveals assumptions about business practice in both China and Hong Kong and the negotiated meaning, sitting steadily in the pocket

of the dominant meaning, of family obligations and family connections. It also reveals the highly private, personal and locally specific details which ultimately influence the larger, and seemingly impervious discourse of global capitalism. It is the cross-textual, momentary glance of past, present and future, captured in Vincent's epiphany, that makes this film fascinating to watch. *To Get Rich is Glorious* is revealing and informative without authoritative statement, and successful in its attempts to transcend the constrictive modes normally associated with television production.

One of Torrens' most distinguishing methodological approaches to his material, and one which corresponds to Denzin's formulation of a deconstructive approach to interpretation, is that Torrens is profoundly interested in revealing people's expectations and assumptions about themselves and the world around them. This is never more evident than in his most recent film, *The Men Who Would Conquer China* (2004). Nominated for a 2004 AFI best documentary award, this film deepens Torrens' investigation into the ideological archaeologies of Mart Bakal and Vincent Lee. Over three and a half years of observation, Torrens keeps his camera on the cultural and personal assumptions of these two men and their relationship. It is a relationship which is optimistically born in 'perceived mutual advantage', but throughout the film is challenged until the tension between their conflicting ideological forces is strained to breaking point.

Torrens exposes the ideological 'archaeology' of these men, by deconstructing the dominant and negotiated meaning of a phenomenon that is universal and has an assumed currency; the phenomenon of 'getting rich'. It is the potential for 'getting rich' through investment in China that joins these men together in partnership. But as they pursue this ambition, we become increasingly aware that the negotiated meaning of this universal term is different for each of the men. Indeed, it is the cultural and ideological differences behind the negotiated meaning of 'getting rich' that steadily build into two separate and opposing constructs. For Vincent, 'getting rich' is a concept increasingly defined by the philosophical, historical and cultural values of his Chinese heritage. Indeed he says, 'As I grow older, I'm becoming more Chinese.' For Vincent, getting rich is a disciplined, considered process which takes time, patience, and must encompass the greater good of the community. His conservative ambition is to make \$10 million a month. For Mart, 'getting rich' means massive investment, complete restructuring and massive return; his ambition is to make billions and quickly. Mart's perception of getting rich is one defined by the highly competitive, dare I say 'frontier', ideologies of his American heritage, where it's the quick or the dead in uncharted territory.

At the beginning of the film, both men *assume* they are talking about the same ‘getting rich’. They assume they are talking about the same kind of Capitalism, even the same kind of uncharted territory. What Torrens reveals to the audience, without ever stating it, is that indeed they are not. By focusing on the intensely personal dilemmas faced by these men at the height of their differences, Torrens exposes the quintessential ideological differences which dominate the interface of two great cultures. First we see the hope and optimism of similar assumptions, expectations and meaning. Then we see cracks in the facade of similarity. Finally, we see that our own expectations and assumptions are as flawed and fallible as those of the protagonists, because that’s all they are, expectations and assumptions. There is no objective ‘reality’ or ‘truth’. This is social research at its best.

Finally and very briefly, I want to look at an earlier film *Darling River Kids* (1986) , because of its pertinence to the task of revealing archaeologies. In this film, Torrens looks at the impact of the white education system on the children of Wilcannia, and the ways that the local Aboriginal community were trying to address the paucity of indigenous content. The film emerges from the community itself, with personal stories revealing the different ‘archaeologies of knowledge’ at work in the town. Western knowledge is provided by the state school system, whereas Aboriginal knowledge was historically banned from being taught or practiced. These two archaeologies determine two very different types of ‘expectations’ and assumptions by the kids themselves. Colin, for example, is a teenager who has no expectations for his future and furthermore, he doesn’t see this as a problem (as his teachers do). Expectation about the future is of course a western teleological concept, and Colin prefers to adhere to his Aboriginal ‘archaeology’ of knowledge. His friend Nola, on the other hand, wants to finish school and come back to the area as a history teacher. She, like many others, has been encouraged to embrace and utilize the discourse of white education in order to ‘get ahead’ and ‘move up’. But as we watch her take the tentative step towards this western discourse, we are aware as an audience, that she may never be fully included in its perimeters of power. Once again, Torrens reveals the quintessential differences in the ‘assumptions’ about reality between two major cultures, without ever stating it.

Torrens’ adoption of methodological principles which strongly correspond to those outlined by Denzin in *Interpretive Interactionism*, has allowed him to create a body of work which transcends many of the restrictive ‘formulations’ and modes of exposition preferred by television production. These are:

1. His use of and rich contextualization of personal stories.

2. His attention to the network of constructed meanings and archaeologies of assumed knowledge that characterize the environment of his subjects. (Temporal mapping)
3. His deconstruction of the dominant and negotiated 'meanings' within this environment.
4. His use of the personal epiphany as a structural point of focus.
5. His investigation of the relationship between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues'.
6. His approach to 'representation' which deprivileges any dominant theory, but rather gives voice to multiple perspectives and assumptions about 'reality', and as much as possible, leaves the ultimate interpretation to the audience.

Interpretive Interactionism is arguably one of the most sophisticated research methodologies in a long evolution of human enquiry, and it is clear that it can be applied in the documentary field. Since surprisingly little has been done to address 'research' in documentary film practice since Grierson's first principles were published in 1946, I would strongly encourage Film Schools to introduce Interpretive Interactionism to documentary students by way of providing clear, ethical, methodological principles in the business of representing 'the other' reality. 'The reality I speak of here is the same one Hobbes described, but a little smaller.'¹⁹ The 'other' reality is the one that lives between the cracks in our assumptions about reality and meaning.

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Endnotes:

¹ Woody Allen, *Getting Even*, Random House, Canada, 1971 (record of page no lost)

² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tavistok, Great Britain 1972

³ Denzin 1989, *Interpretive Interactionism*, Sage Publications, Newbury Pk, London 1989 (pp83-103)

⁴ W. Hugh Beddeley, *The Technique of Documentary Film Production*, Focal Press, London NY 1975

⁵ John Corner, *The Art of Record: A critical introduction to documentary*, Manchester University Press, Manchester & NY 1996

⁶ Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, Routledge Inc, NY 1993

⁷ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1991

⁸ Denzin 1989, *Interpretive Interactionism*, Sage Publications, Newbury Pk, London 1989

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (orig 1927), Harper Row 1962, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press 1982

¹⁰ H.G. Godamer, *Truth and Method*, Sheed and Ward, London 1975, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, University of California Press 1976

¹¹ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, Prentice-Hall NJ, 1969

¹² Denzin 1989, (pg 11)

¹³ Norman K Denzin, 'The Art and Politics of Interpretation' in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin & Lincoln (Eds), Sage, Cal 1994 : (pg 501)

¹⁴ Jean Paul Sartre, 'Progressive-regressive method' in *Search for a Method*, Knopf, NY 1963

¹⁵ Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A theoretical introduction to Sociological Methodology*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs N.J. (Third Edition) 1989

¹⁶ Ibid; Foucault 1972

¹⁷ Denzin calls these *self stories* 1989 : 38

¹⁸ Torrens continued his investigation into the archaeology of winning with a series called *Striving*. From this series, the film *We Both Want to Win*, won the Grand Prix at the 11th International Festival at Dranj (then) Yugoslavia. *The Hurdle* screened at the Berlin, Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals.

¹⁹ Woody Allen, *Getting Even*, Random House, Canada, 1971 (record of page no lost)