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Education in motion: uses of documentary film in educational research

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This paper explores the challenges for social and cultural historians of education of using documentary films on schools and schooling as a research resource. It draws upon the outcomes of the British Academy-funded Documentary Film in Educational Research project, an international study that focused on developing methodological frameworks for researching school documentaries. The paper offers definitions of the notion of documentary and considers the range of styles and forms that constitute “school documentaries”. Among the salient methodological issues examined is the potential for documentary film to be used both as a source and an object of study. These multi-dimensional possibilities raise a series of questions about different status and usages of documentary footage according to research context and about the myriad social, production, genre and technological contexts in which readings of school documentaries are embedded. The paper argues the need for historians of education to develop networks that can contribute not only to academic study of school documentaries but also to the urgent work of archiving and circulating films.

Keywords: documentary; film; television; visual archives; research methods

It is not the literal past, the “facts” of history that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language . . . we must never cease renewing those images.¹

I don’t believe that a period of history – a given space of time – my life – your life . . . contains within it one “true” interpretation just waiting to be mined. But I do believe that it may contain within it several possible narratives . . . and those ways are determined by the needs and demands and the expectations of different people and different eras.²

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¹Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 66.

²In Brian Friel, *Making History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 15–16, Irish rebel leader Hugh O’Neill finds himself caught between reality and representation in his encounters with his biographer, Peter Lombard, who utters these words in an attempt to explain the complex relationship between writer, subject and audience that pervades the documenting of history. Friel’s earlier play, *Translations*, also explores these historical dynamics and what John Grierson once termed, “the creative treatment of actuality”. We take for granted that “images of the past” are not only embodied in language but in the visual also.

Introduction

These epigraphs may be better received by some historians than others. Either way, they perhaps offer some clues as to why documentary films, despite the salient role they have played in depicting schools and schooling since the 1930s, remain an under-used resource among historians of education.³ For, in accepting documentary films as a valid historical source, we pitch ourselves into the cracks between “reality” and “representation”, into what Stella Bruzzi has termed the “negotiation between reality, on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other”.⁴ This paper is not the first to advocate the use of audio-visual sources by social and cultural historians. However, despite some innovative historical research,⁵ we would argue that school documentaries are still lodged in the space described by the medical historian Kelly Loughlin, having “yet to pass from the limbo of being simply *dated* into the academically accredited realm of *historically significant* and routinely consulted sources”.⁶ The growth, since the 1990s, of visual research within the history of education has tended to favour still images over documentary film. Conversely, the body of film studies literature on documentary film has paid little attention thus far to representations of education.⁷ This paper offers an extended tracking shot (think of the long take that opens *Touch of Evil*) of an inchoate research field. Our setting is partially familiar: debates about how, as historians of education, to approach and assess “the potential of an avalanche of sources”.⁸ The back story is gradually outlined (in our British Academy-funded project, *Documentary Film in Educational Research*) and narrative conflict emerges. The narrative unfolds via a series of takes on the challenges of approaching school documentaries as a historical source. That is, how might we develop historical readings of the networks of context, production and reception; the relations between the visual and aural; and the dialectic between reality and image that constitute documentary films on schools and schooling?

³The research project from which this special issue emerged aimed to contribute to redressing this deficit. We wish to acknowledge the valued support of the British Academy in funding the study, *Documentary Film in Educational Research: Producing Methodologies*.

⁴Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4. For a wider ranging consideration of textuality in the writing and interpretation of histories of education, see Sol Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies: Toward a New Cultural History of Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

⁵See, for instance, Peter Cunningham, “Moving Images: Propaganda Film and British Education 1940–45”, *Paedagogica Historica* 36, no. 1 (2000): 389–406; Karl Cateeuw, K. Dams, Marc Depaepe, and Frank Simon, “Filming the Black Box: Primary Schools on Film in Belgium, 1880–1960: A First Assessment of Unused Sources”, in Ulrike Mietzner, Kevin Myers, and Nick Peim, eds., *Visual History: Images of Education* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2005), 303–32.

⁶Kelly Loughlin, “The History of Health and Medicine in Contemporary Britain: Reflections on the Role of Audio-visual Sources”, *Social History of Medicine* 13, no. 1 (2000): 131.

⁷Ian Grosvenor, “From the ‘Eye of History’ to ‘a Second Gaze’: The Visual Archive and the Marginalized in the History of Education”, *History of Education* 36, nos. 4–5 (2007): 607–22, is among recent explorations of visual sources in educational research. Jon Prosser, ed., *Image-based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers* (London: Falmer, 1998), draws together a useful selection of research from across disciplines, including some writing on film.

⁸Loughlin, “The History of Health and Medicine in Contemporary Britain”.

Documentary Film in Educational Research: aims and methodology

The articles contained in this special issue grew out of a British Academy-funded research study conducted in 2009–2010. The aim of the Documentary Film in Educational Research project (DFER) was to build upon emergent approaches to utilising school documentaries in historical research on education. DFER was organised around a series of three workshops (in Belgium, England and Scotland),⁹ led by a core research team of nine academics drawn from the Universities of Birmingham, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leuven, Ghent and Lisbon. In the workshops, colleagues from each university presented and offered historical analysis of documentary films. The project also drew upon the critical contributions of an art historian, a historian of film and a film archivist; their responses to the six main articles in this collection are included in this issue as a series of “Afterwords”. The analyses and debates that emerged from the workshops encompassed both “intrinsic” analyses of the form and content of each film and “extrinsic” analyses, in which the films, separately and comparatively, were used to explore methodological questions. The first methodological challenge concerned the two-fold nature of film as a resource in historical research. In some cases, school documentaries might be utilised as a *source* (of information) in studying particular periods, policies, practices and ideologies in education. In other instances, films might become *objects* of research, to be studied for their representational and technical features. For instance, how might school documentaries aim to direct society’s and individuals’ self-observation? What kinds of definitional or representational power have school documentaries exerted? What kinds of intersection between educational, political and media logics can be identified? Second, DFER aimed to develop understandings of the *status* of documentary film artefacts as data sources. This involved questions about, for example, the extent to which film footage might act as a sufficient “stand-alone” source or else might rely upon “triangulation” with other sources, via accumulation of extensive contextual detail. The notion of “context” was itself multi-dimensional; we might refer to particular social contexts but also to cinematic and televisual contexts. For example, what film genres, visual grammar and technological devices might a school documentary made in the 1930s draw upon, in comparison with a film made in the 1990s?

The overarching aim of the DFER workshops was to consider which analytical frameworks might best further understandings of relationships between documentary-makers’ intentions, their historical contexts, the forms and technologies of their work, contemporaneous audience receptions and trans-historical readings. These workshops, to which a small number of research students, film archivists and interested academics were invited, produced collective (though not consensual) analyses. Our objective was to produce a special edition journal and website materials that offered methodological frameworks useful both to experienced academics and novice researchers. Prior to the workshop series, the DFER team had agreed, for the purposes of the project, provisional definitions and boundaries, in order to ensure an operable, rather than exhaustive, range of possible film sources. Thus our definition of “school documentaries” incorporated three salient genres: commercially produced cinema documentaries; locally produced documentary film not intended for commercial use; and

⁹We wish to thank the academics and doctoral students who attended the DFER workshops and seminars in Ghent, Birmingham and Edinburgh for their support and critical engagement.

television documentaries. The earliest material we examined was produced in the 1930s; the most recent documentary was from 2008. The workshops began, in Ghent, with examples from all three genre categories, drawn from English archive collections. Thereafter, members of the international project team selected films from all four national sites (Belgium, Portugal, Scotland and England). In total, eight films were collectively viewed and analysed. The films included both those in which schooling was the producers' intrinsic focus (films that focused on aspects of educational policy, theory, practice or experience) and also documentaries that had a school setting but approached the school as a microcosm of wider social issues and debates. Outside of the workshops, the research team also began the work of creating "filmographies": identifying existing films on education and collating and cataloguing production details. Clearly, this was only a tentative step towards the national indexes of school documentaries that we would like to help work toward.

We do not claim that either our selection of genres or our combination of national sites exhausts the definition of "school documentaries". We did not, for example, include examples of reality television or historical reconstructions (although these would be valid objects of future research). All of our films were European in origin. During the course of the project, we considered extending our viewing to include colonial period documentaries that offered "official" depictions of education in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean but felt that the proliferation of issues that would be raised could not be dealt with adequately within the practical limitations of the DFER project. We also considered, for this special issue, including additional contributions by researchers from other countries. However, we agreed that a valuable coherence was provided by organising the issue around the work of those who had collaborated over an extended period on the DFER project and that this should take precedence over bolting-on additional contributions. The diversity of the team, given its modest size, should also be noted. The team was drawn from four national sites and was also diverse in terms of its disciplinary range (including academics from sociological and cultural studies backgrounds, as well as historians – and including professional archivists, as well as academics among its invitees). Within our national and disciplinary boundaries there were also other different positions that should be acknowledged. There are marked historical, political and systemic differences between schooling in England, Scotland, Belgium and Portugal; indeed, even the English and Scottish sectors are distinct education systems. At particular points in the research tensions in ethnic and gender positionality also became apparent, sometimes in ways that were not easily resolved in the workshops. Understandings of what might constitute an "emotional response" to a film or understandings of educational and social "context" are sinewed by experiences of gender, class and racialisation, as well as disciplinary perspectives. However, the purpose of the project was not to make claims for definitive or consensual understandings but to begin to depict, to imagine, a field of research, with myriad possibilities for future studies.

It is also worthwhile offering a brief note on the origins of the DFER team's interest in the potential of documentary film as research data. As historians of education, several members of the team have a longstanding interest in visual research and related archival sources. This interest in image-based research has been explored in recent years through Network 17 of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER). In addition, around the time that the DFER study was proposed and initiated, there were other events that exerted an influence on the project's focus. Principal among them was an exhibition of an art installation in late

2008 at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England, which featured work by the pioneering New Zealand video artist, Darcy Lange (1946–2005).¹⁰ In 1976–1977 Lange conducted video research in schools in Birmingham and Oxfordshire, filming classroom activities. Lange then used his initial video footage as a stimulus tool, playing the videos back to pupils and teachers, discussing them and video-recording the participants' responses. In the Ikon exhibition, classroom footage and participants' video-recorded reflections were intercut and presented in an installation, comprising facsimiles of school spaces (screens set on "classroom" rows of school desks, a mock-up of a school assembly hall used as a projection screen). Mercedes Vicente comments that Lange's video practice "could arguably belong to the tradition of social documentary, given his aspirations of raising awareness and potential agency for his subjects . . . however . . . as a pioneer of video, the origins and development of Lange's practice parallel that of the medium itself".¹¹ The Ikon exhibition had a marked influence on our interest in the diverse potential of school documentaries as research data. Here was a video display that, in both design and content, pushed boundaries between ethnography, intervention and the creative arts (exemplifying in certain respects the notion of "cultural learning" that is currently emergent in education in the UK). Lange recorded aspects of school life in the 1970s but also offered reflexive, agentive spaces for participants. His documentation of school life used technology in ways that drew attention to genre, to emergent video techniques and to struggles over the ownership of representation. These dimensions, and the problems and issues embedded in them, all became recurrent themes within the DFER project.

Documentary: forms, functions and contestation

As Dirk Eitzen has remarked, it is now 80 years since the Scottish film director John Grierson first used the term "documentary" to describe his work yet "the definition of the term remains a vexed and controversial issue, not just among film theorists but also among people who make and watch documentaries".¹² In the Anglophone world, Grierson retains a spectral presence in the field of documentary film. However, even an "incontrovertible" statement such as this draws our attention to some of the same contentious practices that pervade documentary-making itself, wherein "fact", "argument" and "persuasion" are bound together and the positions of film-makers and audiences alike determine the ways in which issues and events are framed, populated and made significant. After all, we could just as easily begin our brief survey of documentary's forms and functions a decade earlier, with reference to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* or the work of Dziga Vertov in the early Soviet period. Indeed, Jeremy Hicks describes Vertov's "kino-pravda" movement (translated by Hicks as "cine-eye" – or "kino-eye"¹³) in terms strikingly similar to those often used in relation to Grierson. For Hicks, the example of early Soviet journalism:

¹⁰Details on the Ikon Gallery's exhibition of Darcy Lange's video art can be accessed at www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/programme/current/event/263/work_studies_in_schools/

¹¹Mercedes Vicente, ed., *Darcy Lange: Study of an Artist at Work* (Birmingham: Ikon/Govett-Brewster, 2008), 15.

¹²Dirk Eitzen, "When is a Documentary? Documentary as a Mode of Reception", *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 1 (1995): 81.

¹³See Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill International, 2010), 169.

inspired [Vertov's] creative transformation of newsreel into the new form of documentary film ... turn(ing) newsreel from the illustration or recording of events into an overt attempt to persuade through images ... intervening minimally in what he filmed, striving for a balance between recording and reworking.¹⁴

In his influential overview of the history of documentary film, the American academic Bill Nichols depicts Grierson as the inheritor of Vertov and Flaherty's innovations. In creating, between 1930 and 1933, the film unit of the Empire Marketing Board, Grierson "persuaded the British government to do with film ... what the Soviet government had done since 1918: make use of an art form to foster a sense of national identity and shared community commensurate with its own political agenda".¹⁵ Nichols emphasises that Grierson was both film-maker *and* theorist,¹⁶ whose theoretical concerns were with "the creative treatment of actuality" (a term that has subsequently been widely problematised, since it is dependent on a particular confidence in knowing what constitutes actuality)¹⁷ and the possible relationships between documentary film and the production of (democratic) discourses and action. In his 1943 work, *Propaganda and Education*, Grierson was explicit about the social function of documentary. He argued that, within social democratic systems, predicated upon persuasion and inclusion rather than compulsion, documentary film:

translated the material of citizenship into terms which [were] capable of being grasped and which ... [were] inductive of action.¹⁸

In short, even a brief examination of the roots of documentary forms and functions serves to dispel any notion that there was a prelapsarian moment in which its originators believed in documentary film as an unaffected capture of reality, as opposed to the recording and reworking of events. Indeed, Nichols emphasises that, above all, documentary is a form of *argument* about the historical world (as opposed to the imaginary or metaphorical worlds of fiction).

Nichols' own theorisation of documentary practices has been highly influential. Nichols initially argued strongly that the development of documentary forms could be understood in chronological fashion. To this end, he defined five successive modes:¹⁹

- the *expository* mode (characterised by "omniscient" narration; an ostensibly direct relationship between images and voice-over; a conventional narrative structure; a clear "point of view" supported by minimal use of interviews)

¹⁴Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (London: IB Tauris, 2007), 1.

¹⁵Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 145.

¹⁶See also Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), for a detailed examination of Grierson's seminal role and his theoretical influence on British documentary film.

¹⁷Eitzen, "When is a Documentary?"

¹⁸Grierson, quoted in John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 72.

¹⁹Nichols has amended and relaxed his categories more recently. Compare the five categories outlined in Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts of Documentary* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), with those outlined in Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 145, wherein a "poetic" mode is also posited.

- the *observational* mode (ostensibly “non-interventionist”, fly-on-the-wall presentation; editing that creates an impression of “real” time; use of zoom lenses and hand-held cameras)
- the *interactive* or *participatory* mode (akin to participant-observation in the social sciences; the film-maker is shown encountering or “living” a particular social world)
- the *reflexive* mode (acknowledgement of the documentary medium and attendant problems of production; reflections on issues of representation and realism)
- the *performative* mode (also self-reflexive, with the film-maker becoming a deliberately obtrusive screen presence in order to interrogate questions of meaning and understanding).

However, Stella Bruzzi has queried Nichol’s apparent reliance on a chronological/teleological model. She points out that Nichols himself has retreated somewhat from a linear understanding and she argues that, rather than superseding one another, these modes overlap, co-exist and hybridise. Bruzzi also addresses the over-anxiety (as she sees it) of debates about “reality” and “representation” in documentary film. Rather than agonising over the documentary’s supposed perpetual failure to depict “actuality”, it is, she argues:

perhaps more generous and worthwhile to simply accept that a documentary can never be the real world, that the camera can never capture life as it would have unravelled had it not interfered, and the results of this *collision between apparatus and subject are what constitutes a documentary*.²⁰

Moreover Bruzzi asserts that readings overly concerned with the fact that documentary cannot “be decontaminated of its representational quality”²¹ misunderstand the pact between film-maker, film and audience, which is “far more straightforward than . . . theorists make out . . . the spectator is not in need of signposts and inverted commas to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other”.²²

Worth noting also is the recent critical work of John Corner, who has suggested reviewing the very idea of “documentary”, particularly in relation to the myriad forms of non-fiction film that pervade television schedules in the twentieth century. Given the increasing dominance of non-fiction television (as opposed to current cinema, where fiction still overwhelmingly dominates) and the proliferation of sub-genres, such as docusoaps and variants of “reality” television, the term “documentary” might, suggests Corner, have lost its value as a generic identifier. It might be safer, he argues, to think of documentary in terms of practice, rather than product: to “ask ‘Is this a documentary project?’ . . . [rather] than to ask ‘is this film a documentary?’”.²³ Corner identifies “three classic functions to which documentary exposition, testimony, and observation have variously been harnessed”. These are: “the project of democratic civics” (Grierson’s notion of promoting dominant versions of

²⁰Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 7.

²¹*Ibid.*, 4.

²²*Ibid.*

²³John Corner, “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions”, *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 258.

citizenship); “journalistic enquiry and exposition” (documentary as reportage, an act of witness); and “radical interrogation and alternative perspective” (a determinedly unofficial “criticism and correction of other accounts in circulation”).²⁴ To these three “classic” modes, he adds the function of “documentary as diversion”. There has, Corner claims, been a marked shift (in television) away from expository, analytic and propagandist aims towards “popular factual entertainment”, characterised by “high intensity incident . . . anecdotal knowledge, and . . . snoopy sociability”.²⁵ In style and technique, this recent phase (from the late 1990s onwards) has seen reciprocal borrowing of styles, so that documentary television has taken on elements of fictional style and vice versa. Moreover, evident in documentary as diversion is a rethinking of notions such as “public interest” (indeed “a quiet but deepening interest over the very idea of ‘the public’”) and the emergence of “a version of ‘the popular’, grounded in consumption, which is often in direct tension with notions of ‘the public’”.²⁶ For Corner, these shifts and tensions may signal a *post-documentary* culture.

What are school documentaries?

The issues of form, function, technique and reception raised by producers and critics of documentary film guided and problematised the DFER project’s definitions of what might comprise a school documentary. First, there is definition by what (as a simple descriptive tag) we might term content or subject matter. There was general agreement that the project should concern itself with non-fiction films set in and around schools: that is, films organised around visual images of schools and schooling (we did not look at films on post-compulsory education but there is no reason why future research might not extend into documentaries on colleges or universities). We were not concerned with “educational” films used in schools (as teaching aids) unless they were also films *about* schools (perhaps used in initial teacher training or continued professional development settings). However, a definition of non-fiction films with school settings or a school focus might include films about education per se (focusing on, for instance, curriculum, pedagogy, pupil attainment, policy and reform) and also films in which the school is presented as a microcosm of wider social phenomena (multiculturalism, changing gender roles, attitudes and behaviour among young people). Out of these, might emerge a vast range of styles, formats and representations: critiques of local and national education strategies and policies; case studies of practice or school experiences; reviews of the state of the education system or speculations on its future; representations of “good” schools, teachers and practices or of “failing schools”; depictions of “heroic innovators”; accounts of the history of education; explorations of schools as communities and schools within communities; documentaries on specific topical issues; reflexive analyses of how documentary-makers construct narratives of school life; or analyses of inter-field relationships between film, journalism and education policy.

A second tag might refer to intended audience. Films about schools and schooling might be geared variously toward education professionals, parents, pupils, the wider public (and the wider *electorate*). Needless to say, these might overlap. Third,

²⁴Ibid., 259–60.

²⁵Ibid., 260.

²⁶Ibid., 265.

to return again to Corner's typology of functions, school documentaries might encompass diverse aims: the project of democratic civics; journalistic enquiry; radical interrogation; or diversion. Related to these functions was the extent to which films were intended to record, log or "document" in the strictest sense, or else to promote reflexive professional practice, or else (either as a normative or an aspirational text) to encourage society's self-observation (consideration of what might be done to improve science teaching, to improve pupil attainment or to strengthen the state sector).

As indicated earlier in this article, genre and sub-genre are notoriously difficult to define and distinguish. As with function and audience, issues of genre are also related to the complex, sometimes unfathomable (because of lost production and cataloguing data) issues of commissioning, production and design. In simple terms, our range of viewing included cinema and television; it encompassed the genres of commercially produced documentaries; locally produced documentary film not intended for commercial use (such as those produced by schools themselves); and local and national television documentaries. In other research contexts "genre" might be defined differently – along the lines of, for instance, producers or funding bodies, subject matter and/or audience, comparisons of "establishment" and "non-establishment" sources, or format and style. Our viewing offered sufficient range (in terms of genre, technique, function and national origin) to enable us to consider methodological problems and possibilities but, clearly, only begins to point to the mass of potential resources ("the avalanche of data") contained in national and local archives, retained in schools and government departments or lying unclaimed in stock cupboards and attics. Future research might explore: self-contained documentaries made for cinema or television; documentary series; news footage; current affairs "magazine" segments; propaganda films; party political broadcasts; teacher recruitment and training films; educational films aimed at students (but focusing on school or college life); amateur films made by pupils or teachers; Open University and schools television programmes; and docusoaps, docudramas and historical recreations. To this list might also be added an extension into the field of fictional films about school and schooling.

School documentaries: data in context

We have provisionally mapped out the fuzzy and porous boundaries of "school documentary" but to what uses might we, as social and cultural historians of education, put these film artefacts? How do we *construct* film as data and what is the status of that data? What is the "use value" of documentary film to researchers? As close readers of Marx will recognise, the use-value of any commodity is not fixed; use-value is determined only at the point of consumption. A bell is a cup until it is struck and so forth – and so it is with the consumption and usage of research data; the ways in which film data are constructed is dependent on the research context (which also includes the positionality of the researcher). We return here to questions about film as source and/or object. Thus when we watch Gerry Bryant's 1945 short, *Children's Charter*, we might make use of it as a *source* of detail about the post-war initiation of tripartite schooling in England and Wales. We might opt to focus more minutely on it as a source of information on pupil–teacher interactions, the design of indoor and outdoor spaces or school uniform. Alternatively, the film itself might become the *object* of study. What representations does it offer of pupils, of

teachers, of notions of “need” and “ability”, of the function of schooling within liberal or social democracy? How does it position the viewer? How does it construct “commonsense” and “normality”? In addition, how do the technologies of production and distribution and the conventions of genre shape the visual and visual-aural constructions that we are viewing?

From these questions proliferates a further set of concerns about how the research context and the historical context(s) of school documentaries intersect. The problems of context are myriad and both quantitative and qualitative. First, how much contextual information is either necessary or desirable? This, again, will depend on the research context. If, for instance, the researcher’s aim is to examine the establishment of the post-war tripartite system and Bryant’s Crown Film Unit/Ministry of Education film is treated as a *source* of information, how much (and what forms of) additional/contextual/comparative data might be necessary to “make sense of” the film and further the researcher’s understanding of the post-war reforms? “Triangulation” is a treacherous research term but should it be reclaimed as a necessary method when using documentary film as a research source? One research possibility is to use documentary film as a historical capsule, containing visual records of school practices, materials and spaces. However, even a cultural inventory approach (in which we might use film to scrutinise school spaces and material) arguably derives its authority from certain forms of contextual knowledge. If, for example, in Alexander Shaw’s 1938 short, *Children’s Story* (produced by Films of Scotland, under Grierson’s supervision), we view children learning to recite spellings of words and the names of their towns for their teacher, what comparative examples do we need before we can confidently describe the lesson as typical or atypical of a particular time period or locality? If we choose to examine school materials in *Ten Years On*, a film produced by the Lincolnshire Education Television Consortium in 1976 about the “progressive” primary school, Eynsham, can we safely describe a Formica table as standard issue? Was the school’s foyer peculiar or generic in its approach to signing and decoration? Moreover, how much of what we view, in terms of classroom practices and materials in a school documentary, can be read as “ethnographic” (that is, a naturalistic capture of everyday behaviour) and how much might have been staged for the purposes of the film (and why was staging considered useful to the visual construction of the film’s argument)?

Even if, as researchers, we are, in certain instances, content to treat film purely as a source of historical information and to minimise our concern with film as object, our consumption of additional data will depend on our prior familiarity with a range of historical features. These might include the national political landscape of the period, the processes of national (or local) education policy, the structure of state (or private) education and national and/or local pedagogic practices. Alternatively, the researcher might be concerned with the film itself as an object of research. Within an object-orientated reading, how much and what forms of contextual data might be required? The researcher might make use of other examples of the given genre or production category: for instance, government propaganda or examples of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) television’s *Panorama* programme in the 1980s. In addition, in order to understand the stylistic conventions of particular genres of school documentary, might it be necessary to compare them with other contemporaneous film genres, in order to accrue knowledge about the technical aspects of editing, scripting or marketing?

These questions are not straightforward ones about whether or not such contextual information is inherently useful but, rather, they require researchers to decide in what particular research contexts different forms of knowledge might be useful – or not. Production context is, without doubt, another salient contextual dimension. However, the information a researcher seeks about commissioning, design and personnel may not always be readily available, in which case our knowledge of the “film-maker” may be vague or partial. It is customary to invoke directors’ names and biographies as “significant”, as a tag or an indicator, as shorthand for particular genre features or ideological positions. Thus we may refer to a John Grierson or a Michael Moore film. However, this already locates the researcher who does so in a particular conceptual paradigm (the paradigm of the *auteur*) in relation to authorship and context. Critical consideration of the context of production makes us aware that film is produced through networks of human actors, concepts and materials traveling across the period of the creation of any given film. For historians, each element of the actor-network²⁷ has its own historical context. So, depending on the research context, knowledge about the availability of colour film, digital technology, sound-tracking devices or the formation of government film units might offer us contextual knowledge as “significant” as knowledge of education Acts or curriculum reform.

Reception, like production, is also a key contextual issue, and one that may be even harder to capture in terms of solid data. Reception should not be confused with attempts to evaluate audience impact in any crude sense. Media theorists have wisely warned against over-confident speculation about the likely impacts of films on those who view them. However, in some circumstances it is possible to access material that affords insights into the contemporaneous reception of documentary films. Information on how widely a documentary was programmed or distributed, the likely size of its audience and the format in which it was distributed or broadcast may have been recorded. Other information about contemporaneous trends in viewing films in cinema, on television or in other settings may also be available. Reception data may include contemporaneous print, television or electronic reviews, internet discussion or follow-up documentaries. These should not be taken as direct evidence of the wider social impact and, of course, recent films are better served with newspaper and internet reviews than older documentaries but such data may be important in aiding researchers’ analyses of the responses that films garnered at the point of original release or broadcast.

How far should we put our trust in contextual knowledge, though? Making meanings and drawing historical insights from film is contingent on acknowledging and understanding, where possible, the intention of the commissioning body and the “film-maker” at the moment of production (or rather the *network of moments* that comprise production). However, we should also be willing to look for other possible disruptions, to elicit meanings that are grounded in the captured reality of the moving images and the interplay between image, soundtrack and the nexus of

²⁷Space, of course, precludes extensive discussion of Bruno Latour’s development of actor-network theory. However, John Law’s paper, *Notes on the Theory of Actor Networking: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity* (Lancaster: Centre for Science Studies, 1992), provides an accessible guide to Latour’s rethinking of the sociology of science, which emphasises the ways in which social effects are produced by patterned networks of diverse actors, not only human actors but also conceptual and material “actors”. Thus digital editing techniques might be considered a “social actor”, just as a scriptwriter or director is.

voices (narration, interviews, incidental conversation).²⁸ Foucault advised, “Never consent to being completely comfortable with your own certainties.”²⁹ Foucault was not an aphorist but there is an ever-present possibility here, of course, of being a too “knowing” viewer who looks at the film, but does not see or hear. The “knowing gaze” can be a barrier to seeing, a limitation on the fluid economies of meaning.³⁰ Further, “knowing” is always accompanied by a particular form of understanding; there is a subjective quality (raced, gendered, classed and disciplinary) to our looking.³¹ That said, the notion of the “knowing gaze” as a block to true seeing must itself be interrogated; to employ the notion of a “knowing gaze”, after all, risks implying that we can access an “unknowing” or “less knowing” gaze. To paraphrase Zeus Leonardo,³² the search for an originary gaze is betrayed when upon interrogation what appears general becomes a front for the universalisation of a particular racialised, gendered or classed experience. It is, therefore, more important to acknowledge our own particular forms of knowingness than to conceal them behind claims to a “less knowing” eye.

The three Rs: reading, writing and archiving

In considering the multiple contexts in which film might be constructed as research data, we have discussed technologies of production and representation. Three other “technologies” should also be addressed. First, any discussion of the technologies of reading and writing (that is, ways of offering critique of film) must acknowledge the challenges presented by documentary film as visual, or rather *visual-aural* data. There are problems inherent in writing about film, in putting the visual to paper. Robert Rosenstone has claimed that:

Exposition to the medium of film, especially in its narrative forms, can have a subversive effect upon the historian. So many techniques of film (like those of modernist and postmodernist writing) seem to cry out for use by the scholar. Montage, intercutting, collage, the mixing of genres, the creative interaction of fact and fiction, history, memory and autobiography – why are these not part of the (re)presentational modes of the historian as narrator or essayist?³³

²⁸Zadie Smith, “Rereading Barthes and Nabakov”, in Z. Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), offers a compelling re-discussion of the perennial tension in reading between claims for authorial intention and claims for fluidity of meaning, warning equally against privileging the Reader and the Author, and concluding with a depiction of “Author and . . . reader . . . stumbling towards meaning simultaneously, together.”

²⁹Michel Foucault, “For an Ethics of Discomfort” in S. Lotringer and L. Hochroth, eds., *The Politics of Truth: Michel Foucault* (New York: Semiotext, 1997), 144. See also, Valerie Harwood and Mary Louise Rasmussen, “Studying Schools with an ‘Ethics of Discomfort’”, in Bernadette M. Baker and Katharina E. Heyning, eds., *Dangerous Coagulations, The Uses of Foucault in the Study of Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 305–21.

³⁰For a discussion of the “knowing gaze”, see Ian Grosvenor, “The School Album: Images, Insights and Inequalities”, in *Educació i Història* 15 (2010): 149–64.

³¹Nick Peim, “The History of the Present: Towards a Contemporary Phenomenology of the School”, *History of Education* 30, no. 2 (2001): 177.

³²Zeus Leonardo, “‘Through the Multicultural Glass’, Althusser, Ideology and Race Relations in Post-civil rights America”, *Policy Futures in Education* 3, no. 4 (2005): 400–12.

³³Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1995), 226.

Rosenstone draws attention to the “forms” and “styles” that researching film might impel historians to develop. Film creates narrative and argument through complex and deceptive visual and visual-aural constructions, not just through a linear paragraph-to-paragraph, footnote-to-footnote motion. Its visual constructions are enabled by continual developments in recording and editing techniques. Much has been written about the simultaneous development of early avant-garde cinema and modernist literature and the ways in which exchanges between them created new grammars that have pervaded the whole culture, that have made new ways of reading the visual-aural integral parts of our subjectivities and of our propensity for objectifying others.³⁴ What obligations does this place upon historians of education who write about film? Rosenstone argues for reflexive writing practice and for radical approaches to communicating our “readings” of film:

Admit all the problems involved. That this should not be a written document but a visual one. That one should write about film in film. That words are an especially difficult (impossible?) way of talking about film, without boring people to tears with details of plot and analyses of film language.³⁵

Perhaps Rosenstone’s quote merely paraphrases the remark apocryphally attributed to Frank Zappa: that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture”. More than one person has contested that aphorism by pointing out that, in fact, writing about music is like *writing about* architecture; people do it regularly, some better than others. After all, should C.L.R. James have put aside the draft of *Beyond a Boundary* and instead staged a cricket match³⁶? Are we to assume that there are greater problems inherent in writing about 15 minutes of film footage than, say, two years of intensive ethnographic fieldwork? Over-anxiety and special pleading are also potholes laying in wait for academics.

That said, there is a danger, as with writing about music, that writing in rigidly traditional forms about film may create a bias towards those aspects of film that are most readily represented by the written word: script, interviews, plot details, production histories, relationships to policy and practice. Equally, though, we must be wary of regarding film as a visual medium in a straightforward sense. Where a school documentary contains a soundtrack we must read/view the film as a fully visual-aural medium. Our methods, at various points, may include isolating visual footage or soundtrack but the visual and aural in “talkies” are co-constitutive; they exist in an internal relationship. Open to us as historical researchers are the various methods that current audio-visual technology affords us: the viewing of stop frames, the capacity to playback repeatedly, to slow footage, to produce inventories of sounds and images. All of these are valid and valuable methods but they should not

³⁴Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), is a notable recent example. She explores, for instance the simultaneous development of modernist techniques of montage in American literature (Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams) and European avant-garde cinema of the 1920s (German expressionism, French surrealism).

³⁵Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*.

³⁶The reference here is to James’ 1963 cultural history of Caribbean and English cricket, wherein cricket, as sport, art and political space, is treated as a means by which to grasp the wider social formation of the Anglophone Caribbean. See C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

entirely displace our consideration of “real time” viewing, our sense of how viewers might experience the “whole”, as well as the sum of parts.

However, Rosenstone’s anxieties also relate to a base issue that makes problematic the compact between the (academic) writers and readers. It is that, unless readers of a paper on a film have access to the footage described in that paper, they are reliant on the writer’s descriptive focus. The reader of the paper “views” the film at one remove, in highly mediated fashion. When the writer describes an interaction between a pupil and a teacher, the layout of a classroom or the inflection created by the use of incidental music, the reader is required to invest immense trust in the writer’s judgement, attention to detail and vocabulary. Again, this compact is not entirely peculiar to writing about film. When Paul Willis describes an encounter between a teacher and a disaffected 15-year-old, we have access only to Willis’ account; the actual event cannot be recaptured.³⁷ Indeed, it could be argued that those reading and writing about film have the advantage: in many cases it is possible to access film, not so the moment described by the ethnographer.

However, Rosenstone’s general argument remains pertinent. Ideally, a piece of writing about a documentary on schools and schooling would be linked to footage. In certain settings, such as conference presentations, this may be possible. As interest in the study of documentary film grows among historians of education and access to technology and archives improves, it may be possible (copyright laws allowing) to make full use of hyperlinks or, at least, references to websites.³⁸ The legal status of YouTube, for instance, is currently contested but such websites may become key resources for using film in historical research on education. In print, some papers may make use of stills, as is increasingly common. Stills are a limited resource and should not encourage us to view film only as “moving photographs” but they can be highly useful in enabling the reader to “see” data.

Lastly, the question of the availability of film to readers and researchers points to the vital role of archives and archivists in developing documentary film into a regularly consulted resource among historians of education. There are issues here both of method (in the technical sense) and methodology (in ethical and epistemological senses). In short, a vast amount of work remains to be done in collecting, cataloguing, restoring and maintaining the array of documentary films that have been produced, over the best part of a century, on schools and schooling. As yet, our knowledge of historical “patterns” of development in the production, distribution, genre and function of school documentaries is fragmentary. Our ability to communicate what we know is limited by constraints on the accessibility of the films about which we would write. There is also a question about the validity, the “correctness” of writing and publishing on films, which may be extremely difficult for a general readership to access. On what basis can we claim historical significance for films that are not available for debate and counter-argument? A priestly function is not what we seek; we are making a case for research on documentary film as an integral and accessible part of the historian’s craft.

³⁷The reference is to Paul Willis’ critical ethnography of working-class boys’ experiences of schooling in the English West Midlands. See Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working-class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Westmead: Saxon House, 1977).

³⁸The Documentary Film in Educational Research project team is currently planning to make available online resources for researchers and students, ideally to include guides to uses of documentary films in historical research on education and an international database of school documentaries.

Conclusion

By this point it will be apparent that this article, while it attempts to “admit all the problems involved” in utilising documentary film in historical research on education, is also a piece of advocacy. This position requires us to shed some of the jealously guarded dignity of the historian, to distance ourselves momentarily from academia’s cool deliberations, in order to make a plea. As this article has explained, for historians of education, documentary film has vast potential, both as resource and object. The intention of the DFER project has been to map the possibilities of what is still an inchoate *field* of research as well as an underused data source. We are not the first historians of education to advocate in this way; we follow the earlier research of, among others: Peter Cunningham and Catteeuw et al., film research in related areas of social history (such as that by Kelly Loughlin³⁹ in medical history), the work of ECER’s Network 17 and the vigorous movement towards image-based research in general that has been led by scholars as diverse as Jon Prosser and Peter Burke. We are indebted both to those who have produced documentaries on education with a conscious intention to “make” and “record” history and to those whose intentions were more modest and concerned only with capturing the “now”.

There is a wealth of existing documentary footage on schools and schooling dating back, at least, to the 1930s. Substantial amounts of material are available in the UK through public sector media archives, such as the British Film Institute, the Scottish Screen Archive, the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales, the Media Archive for Central England, as well as bodies such as British Pathé, the BBC, Independent Television News (ITN) and many local libraries, museums and universities. For DFER colleagues based in Portugal, the National Archive of Moving Images, the Museum of Cinema of the Portuguese Cinematheque and the archives of the Institute of Audiovisual Education and the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University of Lisbon, have proved valuable. Numerous archives have been consulted by DFER colleagues in Belgium, including Cinematek (the Royal Belgian Film Archives), the archives of the Belgian Broadcasting Companies, Collectie Amsab, Collectie Kadoc and Collectie Liberaal Archief.

In this article we have drawn upon the research undertaken by the DFER project in order to raise awareness of the richness and the multidimensional value of documentary film for historians of education (as well as those approaching from more sociological or cultural studies orientated positions). Our aim has been to promote and offer conceptual resources for opening up methodological debate. We have pointed to a diverse range of potential research aims and methods and to salient methodological problems and pointers but we make no claims for having produced an exhaustive matrix. Many future research avenues can be imagined (and will, we hope, be pursued). They might range from examining documentaries on post-compulsory education, to considering exchanges between documentary film, fictional film and educational films, to exploring the possibilities of *making* films that present research on documentary film in education. There is, however, urgency to the wider project of developing the uses of documentary film within the history of education. Effective conservation of existing and as yet unearthed footage is imperative. In this emergent field there are known unknowns – films of which we are aware but, as yet, have been unable to track down; there are also unknown unknowns – films per-

³⁹Loughlin, “The History of Health and Medicine in Contemporary Britain”.

haps buried in archives, perhaps as yet unreclaimed, that need to be collated, catalogued, restored and put into circulation. This will require full utilisation of the kinds of network historians often propose: active collaboration between archivists, academics, local historians, media companies, schools and colleges. Our understanding of the history of the production and distribution of school documentaries, as well as our arguments about their potential contributions to the study of history, may evolve substantially in coming years if momentum is maintained in archiving and distribution, as well as critique and conceptualisation. Our aim is to contribute to making school documentaries historically significant and a core, routinely utilised, historical resource. It is a project in motion.

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