Soundings
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Published by University of Huddersfield Press

Cox, Geoffrey, et al.
Soundings: Documentary film and the listening experience.

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Afterword

John Corner

Working as co-editor on the compilation of this book, I was prompted to recall many moments of viewing, of study and of reflection in my own engagement with documentary over nearly 45 years. In particular, I remember my first encounter, at a 1970s weekend film school, with John Grierson’s *Coalface* (1936) and Humphrey Jennings’ *Listen to Britain* (1942), both screened in the same afternoon. What struck me most powerfully was not just the aesthetic richness of which documentary was capable, but also the way in which music played a vital part (in the two films, a very different part of course) in the construction of this richness. Whatever the diversity of musical approach, both films had a ‘strangeness’ given to them by their music. In the case of *Coalface*, this resulted from the harsh modernist tones of Benjamin Britten’s score over the shots of slagheap, working processes, mining communities and uses of coal. At many points, the music partly imitated the sounds of the machines and processes it was looking at (the sounds of ‘the real’ itself), at other points it set up dissonant emotions about what ‘coal mining’ was all about as an industry and an occupation (the sounds appropriate to considering this bit of ‘the real’). In *Listen to Britain*, the movement in sonic relationships was from an alignment with what the audience was hearing at a London lunchtime concert to an overlay, variously sourced and inflected in its associations and tones, across a range of scenes of the ‘wartime everyday’. This intermittent musical frame pushes and pulls a viewer’s sense of that everyday into what is first of all a quiet sense of positivity, a recognition of calm and even of beauty in ongoing life, and finally into a strong current of national resolve.

In both cases, this was not music as background so much as music as a key part of the documentary foreground (importantly, connecting both with images and speech, as do many of the analyses in these chapters). A few months later I started using a range of documentary films in my own teaching on aspects of media, using the BFI’s good stock of 16mm copies, this being well before VHS and DVD options.
I make these points, with no originality beyond their biographical embedding, because they connect powerfully with my sense of what has been achieved in this book and my sense, too, of the kinds of thinking about documentary to which its chapters lead. Such thinking would, in some cases, be a part of developments within ‘documentary studies’, but in other cases it would be taking the instance of documentary work to make more general connections concerning the range of mediated sounds, our uses of them within different combinations of other elements and, more broadly, the changing profile of audiovisual culture.

I want, first of all, to note how the ‘aesthetic’ character of documentary work has variously figured, or not, in academic engagement with it. There is a long, and continuing, history of documentary productions from different periods being used in a largely ‘transparent’ way as forms of visual and verbal documentation to support work in, say, history and the social sciences, as well as in some other disciplines. There is no need for usage of this kind to be naively realist about the ‘truth’ of documentary but certainly there is little time to consider the forms in which ‘the real’ is articulated, the emphasis being on that ‘real’ itself. As we know, the gradual inclusion of documentary within the research and teaching of Film Studies shifted the analytic approach and the scale of engagement. Often, in my recollection, critical work on documentary was considered a rather poor second best to the serious business of grappling with the symbolic densities of cinematic fiction! Many studies, including some in my own earlier writing, attempted to connect both with the thematics of documentary work (as an attempt to show aspects of the world and to say something about them) and with its rich and imaginative recipes for undertaking this business. The essentially referential project of documentary (however complicated, indirect and perhaps even self-critical this project was) needed to be inter-related to its diversity of forms. These forms have nearly always been in some kind of relationship (embrace, critique, denial, alternative) with ideas of ‘realism’, ideas which lie at the centre of any thinking about documentary, as the Introduction noted, and are the focus of most debates about it, including those in the previous pages.

Form sometimes conceals itself and needs excavating by analysis. Across the history of documentary expression, nowhere is this more true than in the forms of ‘direct cinema’ (or later versions of that troublesome category, ‘vérité’) where alignments with ideas of transparency are strongest and, not surprisingly, the use of non-diegetic music has been the most minimal and cautious. In some documentaries, however, particularly those from strands of a more experimental, avant-garde character, it is
impossible to view a documentary without consciously taking into account its formal construction, sometimes a quite challenging task for the viewer. Not surprisingly, such work has figured prominently in scholarly accounts, including mine, on the grounds that its relative complexity and cultural ambition, in the use of speech and music, for example, gives greater room for analytic play than is to be found in more conventionally ‘realist’ productions. This is understandable, although it can lead to neglect of the more popular modes of documentary, including those of television, which also hold formal interest.

I think the sharpness of the division between popular and ‘art’ documentary has reduced in recent years, as part of a broader cultural shift in which aspects of postmodern thinking have been active in relation not only to ideas about the ‘true’ but also to ideas about generic propriety and to how ‘playful’ and ‘entertaining’ a documentary can be allowed to be. Certainly, there is now a very wide diversity of documentary aesthetics at work internationally, often drawing extensively in their aural as well as their visual styling from a broad inter-generic palette, one to which the affordances of digital production have added considerably. We know that ‘documentary’ has never been any kind of firm generic marker, even though largely futile debates about its definition continue to give some scholars a topic for conference papers. Instances of ‘documentariness’, sometimes in sustained form, are now widespread across audiovisual activity, and only in some of these instances do productions work self-consciously under the label of ‘documentary’. Of course, many of the pieces in this collection focus on aspects of this increasing heterogeneity.

I think what I want to say by way of final reflection, in part picking up on what has been said by the contributors themselves, can be organised well under three headings — ‘Cognition and affect’, ‘Listening as cultural practice’ and ‘Producing documentary sounds’. All three, but the first two in particular, connect with a developing research perspective internationally — the exploration of the terms of documentary spectatorship or, as we should say here, listenership.

Cognition and Affect.
What we think about what we see and what we feel about what we see are clearly interconnected. This interconnection is a recurrent theme in film and television analysis, and one given sharper profile by those studies taking a self-consciously ‘cognitive’ approach to the viewing experience. Clearly, sound is deeply involved in helping to manage the emotional frames within which we view documentary scenes,
with music — given its capacity to generate mood, its associational resonances and its appeal to memory — to the forefront here, just as speech is often to the forefront in managing the ‘knowledge yield’ of a documentary. But, as Geoffrey Cox pointed out in his introduction and as many of the contributors show, to split off the consequences of speech and music too firmly risks foreshortening a sense of the way in which music connects with the incremental processes of ‘knowing’ through the length of a documentary, modifying our sense of ‘what is going on’ and positioning us at different vantages from this — at one end of the scale ‘immersive’, at the other coolly distant.

Meanwhile, speech carries its own affective alignments, signalling not only the social and perhaps regional position of speakers but also, in the case of commentary and direct address, the kind of communicative relationship they are attempting with us, the viewers. There may also be clues as to the speakers’ own emotional state, however reduced in projection compared to the dialogue of feature film. The character of the speech, its vocabulary and phrasing, is also clearly of great importance to our reading of the image, as many of the writers here have discussed. It can tightly localize our perception of meaning (as, for instance, in a brief account of the building of a castle spoken across a sequence of shots of its principal features) or can expand and disperse it, taking it ‘higher and broader’ (as in the words of a poem spoken across what appears to be a routine shot of a busy city centre). It can prompt us to reflection or it can attempt to persuade us of a certain evaluation and judgement, possibly using propagandist strategies to ‘enforce’ this. In that sense it can either ‘open up’ the space for thought or variously ‘close it down’ and music can support it in either task.

As some of the chapters bring out very well, it has been a feature of much documentary which has taken itself seriously as aesthetic production to foreground these sonic inter-relationships across knowledge and emotion, perhaps at least temporarily ‘disturbing’ the viewer by placing things out of alignment or in tension or contradiction with each other. The condition of being ‘unsure’ about the knowledge to take from a scene or the appropriate emotions to feel in response to it is quite frequently a consequence of such a practice, pulling the viewer into acts of viewing and hearing that become acts of vigorous questioning, both of what the film is doing and of their own relationship to the persons, acts, circumstances and issues that its images and sound purport to depict. Even in television, where relative simplicity and clarity of development are given emphasis by the terms of a broad audience demographic and levels of casualness in viewer engagement, there is now greater willingness to provoke and to challenge than once there was.
Listening as a Cultural Practice.

Much of this book is the result of ‘careful listening’, often in the context of specialist skills, of analysis or of production. It has posed documentary viewing as ‘listening’ as well as ‘spectating’ and it has refused the tendency to hide questions of sound partially within the terms of questions concerning the image. But listening to a range of media in different contexts, alone and with others, is, clearly, an everyday cultural practice too, of which current strands in Cultural Studies have made us more aware. One way for research to push further here would be to explore a little more the kinds of ‘ordinary listening’ which documentaries receive. This is something of a challenge. There is only a modest literature on the reception of documentary by audiences and quite a lot of this is strongly thematically, rather than formally, oriented, such as the work on modes of reality television. It is possible to find indications of how people have listened to documentaries and what they have made of what they have heard by looking at the postings on film and television websites, but this is a scattershot approach. Nevertheless, it shows some of the difficulties that may be experienced in ‘navigating’ a documentary across its diverse sounds as well as indicating some of the productivity and pleasure of what is heard. More investigation of how viewers ‘follow’ a documentary through the sounds it offers would, I think, prove interesting. How conscious are they of music and how does their awareness of it, and its various resonances and connotations, vary across the documentary? How does it figure in their sense of the images that are shown and the speaking being done? Its function as an important indicator of time-values, both in its rhythm and tempo and its role in the organisation of temporality and duration across a whole film or programme, can really only be confirmed by evidence from non-specialist experience. There is the distinctive case of documentaries which are partly or even largely about music, some examples of which have been discussed. Here, the foregrounding of the music is explicit as it becomes itself the subject of commentary and appraisal or provides a thematically illustrative accompaniment for biographical references to specific composers or musicians. Such work is often quite marked both in its sound structures and in the modes of listening which it receives.

An inquiry of the kind proposed might have to work partly through special screenings or with viewing diaries, with the problems of sensitization that these approaches produce, but if combined with the textual approaches demonstrated here, it could sharpen our sense of the producer-text-spectator relationship, of the processes of listening subjectivity, and further weaken the idea of some homogenous
'viewer' to whom 'the meaning' of a documentary is directly available. Listening out of general interest and listening out of professional research interest are, of course, very different modes of orientation and we know how critic/scholar perspectives and 'ordinary' perspectives can differ across a whole range of cultural production.

**Producing documentary sounds.**

A number of chapters take the reader inside the process of documentary's sonic production. They discuss the framing ideas at work, the more specific plans of approach, the recording and editing phases. In a more explicit way than most analytic work can achieve, they testify to the 'materiality' of sound, its physical presence as music, speech or 'noise', and its capture by particular pieces of equipment. Such materiality poses a challenge for the sound designer and recordist, perhaps also for composers and musicians working on a score, but it is also a factor in the satisfaction of listening, first of all to production workers at the stage of building what will be heard in a film and then to audiences. We can be sure that the technical resources for sonic design will continue to increase and that their employment in the creation of innovative ways to build a documentary soundtrack will draw for its inspiration across a wide generic array. Production studies have developed strongly in media scholarship over the last decade although the problem of access still remains, with only a few practitioners themselves prepared to write in detail about their work in other than a 'handbook' style. This book has certainly helped to extend our knowledge of the perspectives and practices involved. Of course, just as textual analysts are at risk of bracketing out both production and audience phases, and audience researchers are at risk of minimising issues of production design and textual system, so producers can remain relatively ignorant of just how their work has been received both by audiences (beyond the broadest indicators) and by those with an academic interest in the area. It is likely they can therefore benefit from knowing a little more about issues of viewer engagement and understanding.

This collection clearly picks up on the achievements of a wide range of previous scholarship but, as I hope to have indicated, it poses many further questions for exploration, ones which suggest connections across humanities scholarship, pressing further into an understanding of the role played by sound in the media arts.