NFSA

FLY-ON-THE-WALL OR FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR?

DOCUMENTARIES AND JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

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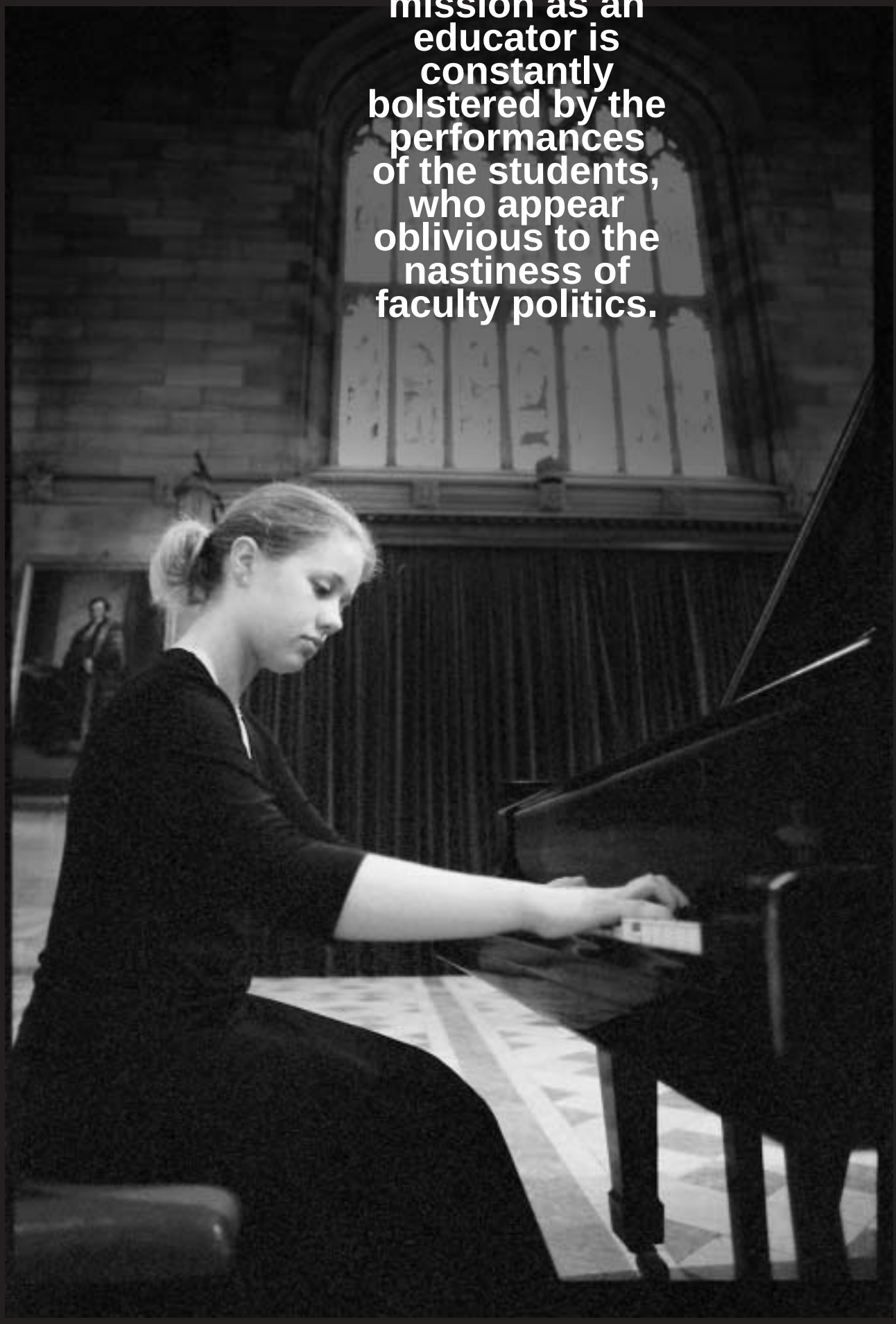
A hi-fi discounter's catalogue which landed in my letterbox recently got me thinking. A broadcast-quality digital video camera costs a few thousand dollars, while an extra fifteen hundred will get you a tripod and enough tapes to last a year. Fly-on-the-wall documentaries are now affordable to anyone with the inclination to spend large periods of time shadowing someone for a behind-the-scenes exposé. What's more, the anxiety of hearing your disposable income purring away in metres of unusable film has been replaced by a serene waiting-game in which the film-maker keeps rolling until the talent unwittingly comes up with the quotable quote which will bring it all together. Imagine a fly-on-the-wall *7-Up* series – all without interviews or narration – in which subjects reveal their loves and biases through the things they do and say in their everyday lives, rather than direct questioning. It is the type of technology which could have a positive effect on the art of documentary-making.

Another apparent positive aspect of fly-on-the-wall's new impetus is that it appears to bring with it little of the ethical baggage which journalists have formerly been forced to confront. Firstly, the participants' decision to grant access to the film-maker should rule out any issue of privacy. When the talent signs on the dotted line, he or she becomes a participant in – rather than a victim of – the film-making process. Concern with bias is also a



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thing of the past because, in the words of the old disclaimer, opinions and views expressed are not necessarily those of the film-makers. A documentary, we are assured, is not an extended current affairs programme in which the journalist must explain and weigh up the right to accuse with the right of reply.

Yet several of the ethical controversies sparked by the success of Reality TV shows should sound alarm bells for viewers of the latest Connolly-Anderson documentary, *Facing the Music*. For example, if fly-on-the-wall documentaries are giving us life as it really is – without the bias or filters of journalistic interpretation – why do people still play it up for the cameras? And if this is a glimpse of unadulterated, real life, why do the on-camera participants spend so much time putting forward their points of view and bemoaning the shabby treatment they have received?

The truth is that even the best fly-on-the-wall documentaries are currently operating in the type of ethically uncharted territory which the more commercially minded television journalists would die for. Audiences can be titillated by the nastiness of workplace fights without having to understand the history of the animosity, and people's privacy is routinely violated in the name of behind-the-scenes authenticity. The audience can never transcend the bias of the main protagonist to glean an insight into the big picture, while no-one on the receiving end of criticism is granted the right of reply. But more importantly still, the audience is presented with a scenario on the assumption that what occurs is real, when what is occurring is actually a type of instantaneous re-enactment for the cameras.

None of these concerns make for an unpleasant documentary – in fact, *Facing the Music* is altogether a more rewarding film than the Anderson-Connolly masterpiece, *Rats in the Ranks* (1996). The question is whether, in the age of cheap video tapes and DIY Reality TV, the documentary-maker can get away with avoiding the standards of fairness and honesty which we have come to demand from our journalists.

TELLING THE STORY

Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson spent over a year filming *Facing the Music.* They ended up with one hundred and sixty hours of material, shot in and around the University of Sydney, with Connolly on camera and Anderson recording the sound (except for the students' performances, which were filmed and recorded separately). The two subsequently spent eighteen months editing the material and have produced an 86-minute documentary which deals with the impact of savage funding cuts to the Music Department.

As was the case with *Rats in the Ranks,* much of the film's structure is a product of developments unfolding before the camera. In *Rats in the Ranks,* the political hide of Leichhardt's charismatic mayor, Larry Hand, is saved by eleventh-hour Machiavellian expediency. The documentary's loose ends are eventually tied up by a *deus ex machina* led by Kate, a councillor who turns 'rat' to support Hand's candidacy.

But while Hand remains true to himself and his questionable values, the narrative structure of *Facing the Music* results in a more challenging film. The outside danger – funding cuts to the department – is still unresolved by the end of the film. This time the element of change is provided by the film's protagonist, Professor Anne Boyd. At the beginning of the 1999 academic year, Boyd is an unrepentant strike-breaker who crosses her colleagues' picket-line while grumbling that it is 'not at all clear to me what it's all about'. By the end of the year she is on stage at a student rally stating clearly through a rickety megaphone that 'students united, *will* never be defeated'. So while Anderson claims the 'sense of economic crisis' was what attracted her and Connolly to the story, *Facing the Music* actually appears more character-driven than *Rats in the Ranks* – and as a result proves a much more complex film.

The film-makers explain Boyd's radical transformation from conservative, middle-class academic to tertiary, middle-class activist by examining three facets of her identity: an administrator forced to cut quality from the curriculum; a passionate yet at times impatient university lecturer; and a successful composer with something to say.

As an administrator, Boyd is out of her depth. She accepts the degrading task of writing letters to find sponsorship for her department, then runs out of steam after the first rejection. She is unwilling or unable to play the numbers game to garner support within her own department and responds emotionally to criticism from the university.

Yet this part of the film is as much about the changing role of academics as it is about tertiary funding cuts. People with a background in research are required to manage large budgets, market their department to the corporate world and get student bums-on-seats for their courses. It is no longer even an issue of whether they are up to the challenge – in *Facing the Music* they clearly are not. Boyd's predicament simply raises the question of whether academic staff should have to take on these tasks at all.

But seeing Boyd in action as a lecturer is a reminder of what good teaching looks like. She's enthusiastic about her subject and eager to get students fired up. When discussing the cuts, she says that it all comes down to 'opening doors' for students. Later she describes Sydney University as her 'holy temple' and teaching there as a 'privilege and a calling'. She increases her teaching load from six to twenty hours a week to keep courses on track and, ultimately, becomes politically militant to protect her students.

As her activism increases, we are left in no doubt her concerns have more to do with the future of her students than academic salaries. By now, her transformation into a union militant is complete. In one protest, a truck pulls up to enter the University grounds and Boyd confronts its driver: 'Hi, mate – if you drive across now, you'd be driving across a picket line'. Not bad for a former scab.

Yet her rapport with a female student illustrates that Boyd's positive energy can come unstuck. At the height of the funding crisis, she reduces a post-

graduate student to tears by criticizing her work in unnecessarily strong words. 'You need a clean slate, let it happen', she says. 'There are so many people walking around this earth, trying to be composers, and they can't bloody well write music. Don't be one of them'.

This moment suggests that the behind-the-scenes politicking in the Department has left Boyd the worse for wear, particularly in the context of her own susceptibility to criticism. Another turning point in her career as Head of Department comes when she's described as 'out of touch' at a senior staff seminar – a relatively mild rebuke, especially in the cut and thrust of university politics today. Boyd is devastated by the remarks, yet does not hesitate in turning on her own student with what are arguably unduly harsh comments.

Boyd's sense of mission as an educator is constantly bolstered by the performances of the students, who appear oblivious to the nastiness of faculty politics. The beauty of the music in the performances interspersed throughout the film places Boyd's commitment to the course in a clearer ideological perspective. In no other department would the importance of nurturing talent have been so apparent and nowhere would the tragedy of funding cuts have been clearer. This is also a rare instance of editorial intervention – the beauty of the music is there to hammer home the message that learning for learning's sake is what an advanced society should be all about.

Boyd's work as a composer comes to prominence as she gradually withdraws from the pressures of university life. She tells her stunned colleagues that composing will now take priority over her academic work and, as a result, she will not be Department Head in the following year. We are then offered an insight into Boyd's work at home over a piano keyboard, followed by the rehearsal and a recital of her composition.

As in *Rats in the Ranks*, the film supplies us with a supporting cast of villains. Most of them remain unseen – Chancellor Leonie Kramer, the faculty, the government. Others are much closer to home: staff members who discuss declining student numbers as though it was the least of their worries; legions of associate professors who say they could be earning three times more in 'private enterprise'; Winsome Evans, a senior staff member with thirty years teaching experience, who admits she is unwilling to take over as Head of Department because she 'can't use a computer'. The film's supporting-role villains have enough depth to raise the issue of whether the funding cuts are in part warranted after all.

THE POLITICS OF FILMING

The positive side of both the fly-on-the-wall documentary and Reality TV is that they offer us an insight into a type of person or a part of society with which we might not be familiar: the machinations of a university department in *Facing the Music* or the *joie de vivre* of a strip-club manager in *Big Brother*. That's not to say the sound-bite of the day on *Survivor* offers us the same insight as the best of 160 hours of footage shot by Connolly and Anderson. It means that for what this concept is – a subjective view of an event – it is informative and worth our time.

But in ethical terms, Reality TV and documentaries must part company. Reality TV is largely immune to the standards of journalism because participants are removed from a wider context. Ten people may be thrown together on an island or in a house and that's where the background ends – their decision to kiss or argue is the only story worth reporting. With *Facing the Music*, the world in which the action takes place is much broader. The University of Sydney is cutting funding as a result of decisions made by a federal government. The discussion which takes place in the Music Department is therefore part of a context which is both political (an analysis of the effects of government policy) and social (an examination of the role education should play in a Western democracy).

Yet the rules of fly-on-the-wall documentary-making are very postmodern: everything is subjective and no voice-overs or authorial intervention will explain the context. There are no one-on-one interviews, no graphs to show the decline of student enrolments *vis-à-vis* funding reductions, no attempt to explain public servants' endemic fear of change. In *Rats in the Ranks*, no-one questions Hand over the morality of his behaviour and no-one gives Councillor MacIndoe a chance to explain how he has been affected by unscrupulous politics. In fact, none of the characters' histories or ideological baggage are even considered. Their background is left to the audience's imagination.

FIRST THE MEAT, THEN THE GRAVY

The fly-on-the-wall documentary can be reduced to a game of propaganda in which contestants consciously use the spotlight to their advantage. The people in the editing suite then decide whether to include material which will undermine the contestants' claim. No matter how unobtrusive the camera, those filmed are acting out a role and playing their best hand.

In *Facing the Music*, to suspend disbelief and see the documentary as anything but a highly artificial environment which Boyd uses as a bully pulpit is no mean feat. Students in the background wave or smile as the camera goes past, while grinning office workers poke their heads through doors. The shadow of the camera crew is at times in-shot, along with the cables and wires of the recording equipment. Winsome usually manages to couple her tracky-dacks with an Amnesty International T-shirt and the eyes of administrator Chris Miles dart nervously towards the camera whenever she speaks (MacIndoe had the same problem in *Rats in the Ranks*).

The scene in which the post-graduate student is berated and cries appears to capture a moment of spontaneity, followed by a pause in which Boyd leaves to make her a cup of tea. The camera remains fixed on the teary face of the student until she feels compelled to do something. She grabs her handwritten music sheet and tears it in half. Why? Couldn't she take it home and rework it? Or was she telling us –

the audience in the picture theatre or in front of the video at home – that she has been made to feel worthless? Either way, it is the type of *coup de theatre* which film-makers ignore at their peril.

Privacy in Reality TV has become a hot topic of conversation in France, where the set of a local version of the *Big Brother* programme was recently stormed by human rights activists arguing the contestants' human rights were being violated. None of the show's participants objected to the terms and conditions of their employment, but it was nonetheless thought they should be entitled to some off-air time. The question was whether people who voluntarily sign away their right to privacy can erode the human rights of the wider community.

With *Facing the Music*, the film-makers have gained access to the professional life of Anne Boyd and have chosen to include several emotional outbursts. The ethical lines are unclear because Boyd has herself granted access to the cameras. What's more, while there is nothing contrived about her tears, the emotion does help put her case more forcefully to a wider audience and the authenticity of the outbursts make for powerful viewing.

But in the case of the red-haired student's tears, the privacy issues become harder to decipher. She may well have consented to the filming and may have had no objection to the use of the footage in the final edit. Yet the French human rights activists believed your right to privacy can be violated even without *Big Brother* cameras in your toilet. If filming people's suffering has an ethical dimension in the case of journalists reporting on starving children or grieving parents, we should also object to a student's pain being presented for our gratification.

Journalistic ethical standards are also challenged by the story-telling devices of both *Facing the Music* and *Rats in the Ranks.* The film-makers leave the newsworthy angle of the story (the Labor betrayal and fifty percent funding cuts) until the end of the films. The decision helps create suspense but also leaves itself open to the criticism often leveled at the *A Current Affair/Today Tonight* genre of story: an Aussie Battler is too poor to afford a life-saving operation, but the story ends with the revelation that he has since found the money. Since the American Civil War, journalists have been taught that the only way of delivering the news is to give the reader 'the meat before the gravy'.

Yet the scene in which Boyd makes her student cry, along with the arguments between Winsome and Boyd, offers the audience the same titillation which lay at the heart of *Rats in the Ranks*. So while reviewers wax lyrical about how Connolly-Anderson films have given us an insight into the political process (Philip Adams said *Rats in the Ranks* was 'our best insight into the political process'), part of the film's success may be found in the commercial appeal of conflict. For audiences increasingly familiar with the social finger-pointing of *The Jerry Springer Show* or the harshness of *The Weakest Link*, the petty deceit of *Rats in the Ranks* may strike a chord. Those who object to the way television places greater emphasis on conflict than explaining the reasons behind it (and resent the way the sound-bite always heightens conflict without adding to understanding) should also condemn the emphasis on real-life conflict of fly-on-the-wall documentaries.

Anderson herself appears to have no doubt her documentaries get bums-on-seats partly because of the biffo. 'We filmed lots of *Rats in the Ranks*-type squabbles', she says. 'I suppose that's what a lot of people are expecting the film to be about, and it is certainly there, it does happen, there are knives in the back'. Yet she also says bitchiness shouldn't get in the way of a good story, and this is where her film parts company with *Big Brother*. 'There were other unbelievably petty things that blew up and occupied people for weeks', she says. '[B]ut we had no desire to put any of that in, because it detracted from what became the big issue'.

ESTABLISHING THE RULES

Ultimately, ethics will not mean much to fly-on-the-wall documentary-makers, who have a right to claim a new space for their methods. The fact that both *Facing the Music* and *Rats in the Ranks* fall short of a journalist's code of conduct takes nothing away from their appeal as films and their ability to provide a limited insight into otherwise unknown parts of society. As viewers, our only concern should be to find a role for these documentaries and recognize their limitations. They are subjective, biased, intrusive and add little to our understanding of complex issues. They should not be seen as a replacement for information, analysis and honest reporting. That's not to say they shouldn't be enjoyed for what they are.

Films produced and directed by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson:

FACING THE MUSIC
A Film Australia National Interest Program in association with Arundel Films, Channel Four Television and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. © Film Australia Limited 2001. Duration: 85 minutes

RATS IN THE RANKS
An Arundel Productions Pty Ltd/Film Australia National Interest Program in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Channel Four and La Sept ARTE. © 1996. Duration: 93 minutes

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