

***Braided Channels<sup>1</sup>: A Genealogy of the Voice of Documentary***  
**Friday 10<sup>th</sup> July – 6002 words excluding bibliography and footnotes –**  
**incorporating referee’s and Hong Kong conference feedback.**

Last year marked a quarter century since Bill Nichols’ essay on the ‘Voice of Documentary’ first appeared (1983). It has been republished twice (Nichols 1988; Rosenthal and Corner 2005) and many current scholars of documentary deploy Nichols’ conception of voice (Leahy and Gibson 2003) or make a similar use of vocal metaphors to speak about problems for film-makers expressing their authentic perspectives in documentary (Porter 1998; Rijavec 2005). This essay underpinned Nichols’ later typologies that categorize documentary films according to their mode of voice – the poetic, the expository, the observational, the reflexive, the performative (1991; 1994; 2001). Recently Nichols returned to discussing ‘documentary voice’ as part of an analysis of documentary as a form of rhetoric (2008: 37 - 38). Throughout, Nichols treats voice as a label that can be affixed to the completed form of each film as a stable entity.

This article revisits Nichols’ original essay, placing it in historical context and considering its relation to its contemporary documentary landscape. It analyzes shifts since in the structures of documentary and surrounding cultural formations and argues that some adjustment is required. Documentary voice needs to be understood not as unitary but as ‘braided’, a form of stranded singularity in which ‘coming to voice’ typically includes the input of many individuals and institutions. A vocabulary is developed to clarify the inter-relationships underpinning the voice of any given documentary. In particular, the category of ‘choric voice’ is developed as an addition to a collection of related words – a kind of conceptual genealogy – to talk about the voice of both individual documentaries and collections of work. With its genesis as an theoretical underpinning to my practice in Australia, the main examples of films and film-support institutions are Australian. The theoretical propositions developed however are supra-national.

**Bill Nichols and the Voice of Documentary**

In Nichols’ essay, voice is defined as:

Something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text’s social point of view ... voice is not restricted to any one code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible,

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<sup>1</sup> *Braided Channels* is the name of my creative research project, based on the history and geography of the Channel Country of Far South West Queensland. This extremely flat area is an inland drainage basin characterized by rivers that, in regular flood, split into myriad braids. Throughout the project this is used as a metaphor for how different account of life in the area similarly form braids of commonality and diversion. The metaphor has in turn in this article been applied to the way various inputs to the final voice of a documentary ‘braid’.

moiré<sup>2</sup>-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes and it applies to all modes of documentary (Nichols 1983).

Nichols' essay was written at a time when the recent ready availability of synchronised sound, and the spread of journalistic techniques of interview, were leading to fundamental shifts in the social relations underpinning documentary production. His essay criticized a trend in which 'the voice of the text disappears behind characters who speak to us' so that 'the film becomes a rubber stamp' (1983: 18). He was concerned about the assumption that an interviewee's testimony could be relied upon as a statement of truth, a tendency to avoid highlighting conflicts and contradictions amongst interviewees, and filmmakers' abdication of the responsibility to assert their own view:

Far too many contemporary filmmakers appear to have lost their voice ... they forfeit their own voice for that of others (usually characters recruited to the film and interviewed) (1983: 18).

In contrast, he argued that a documentary ought to establish a 'hierarchy of voices' in which 'the voice of the text remains of a higher, controlling type than the voices of interviewees' (1983: 24). Nichols' view was part of a wider theoretical response (See Waugh 1984; Youdelman 1988 and Ivens 1965 in Youdelman 1988) to the first generation of film-makers that was able to include interviewee's voices in their films and reacted against what the cited authors viewed as the overt didacticism of the expository documentaries of prior decades by eschewing narration wherever possible.

In establishing a conception of documentary voice that includes, but exceeds, both the soundtrack and any text-based elements, Nichols' provides a powerful tool to consider authorship in documentary. His assertion that film-makers should not assume interviews are a gospel truth that precludes critical analysis or an editorial arrangement to present the documentarian's perspective is an argument well made. When I recall my experience as a practitioner in the 1980s, where narration was a 'dirty word' regardless of its eloquence or efficacy, I am reminded of the importance of this essay.

### **Issues with Nichols' conception of voice that need revising**

Nevertheless in the mid 2000s, when I wanted to theorize my own documentary practice, Nichols' essay did not satisfy me. My creative research project about both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relation to land/scape in a region of Australia, has outcomes including an exhibition with interactive documentary kiosk; journal articles; a radio program; an oral history archive and a planned broadcast documentary. Several issues were problematic:

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<sup>2</sup> This is a term from the textile industry that means 'watered as silk, having a wavelike pattern' *Macquarie Dictionary*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1981. The effect is often achieved by layering two or more sheer layers of fabric on top of each other.

- Nichols' essay takes cinema as the unexamined site of documentary, without seriously considering the televisual that has become the dominant mode of documentary distribution. There is no account of the impact broadcasters have on the voice of films they commission, nor of the voice of increasingly cross-media work with an online element such as *The Man Who Stole My Mother's Face* (Henkel 2002), *After Maeve* (Cattoni 2006), and *Wrong Crowd* (Beattie 2002) where the public can contribute commentary and often their own story in response.
- His assumption that the voice of the film-maker should *always* be privileged over that of other inputs, including especially documentary subjects, sits uneasily with Indigenous protocols that have become commonplace in Australia (Johnson 2000) and elsewhere and with a post-colonial literature that problematizes the question of who has the right to speak on behalf of others (eg Chakrabarty 1997; Brady 2000).
- Voice as a label attached to the completed form of work did not account for the complexities of the process of 'coming to voice', especially in relation to a non-Aboriginal film-maker telling Indigenous stories.

The task of the remainder of this paper then is to consider 'What is a theory of documentary voice that can deal with the issues above and facilitate ethical, effective and hopefully prolific documentary practice in its myriad contemporary forms?' And what vocabulary might help to talk about the various 'braids' of documentary voice?

### **Voice – towards a broader conception**

I reviewed various humanities disciplines that employ vocal metaphors to talk about authorship. The discipline of ethnography, and especially ethnographic film-making, had most to offer, probably because complex cultural politics are typical of relationships between ethnographers and their informants. James Clifford's work developing new ethnographic methodologies to find 'a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances' (Clifford, Marcus et al. 1986: 12) was resonant. The ethnographic film-maker Jean Rouch is a pioneer of such an approach, exploring different models of sharing voice with his subjects from the 1950s onward. In producing *Jaguar (1965)* for instance, Rouch handed over the discursive space of the documentary's soundtrack to his subjects to comment on their edited representation (Rouch and Feld 2003).

From a more contemporary perspective, David MacDougall is a prolific ethnographic filmmaker and an exemplary 'reflective practitioner' who mainly writes about the value of the visual to ethnography. MacDougall often uses the trope of voice to describe forms of authorship in ethnographic filmmaking, but deploys the concept differently than in Nichols' schema. In a 1992 essay he noted that 'In recent years one sees a movement away from monologue toward ... poly thesis: an understanding that comes out of the interplay of voices rather than merely their co-presentation' (republished in MacDougall and Taylor 1998: 121). And in a 1998 essay, 'Transcultural Cinema', MacDougall says that:

The concept of the author of a work as a stable centre is illusory ... in fact, our voices as authors are plural...The author is never isolated but always a contingent being, and the author's 'voice' is always constituted in relation to its object (1998: 274).

MacDougall offers fascinating insights into documentary voice from a practitioner's perspective, but does not coherently revise the theory.

Also from within the arena of ethnographic film, Faye Ginsburg has developed an argument using a visual metaphor that can be applied to see voice as a quality to be managed not just within a given film but also across a field of different films. In an essay subtitled 'The Impact of Indigenous Media on Ethnographic Film' she deploys the metaphor (1999: 158) of the parallax — 'the phenomenon that occurs when a change in the position of the observer creates the illusion that an object has been displaced or moved', — explaining that this physiological difference between the view of our two eyes creates the human capacity for depth of vision. She argues that ethnographic and Indigenous film form a continuum which, when viewed 'within the same analytic frame', lead to a fuller and more complex picture of culture (1999: 173). This perspective will be built upon below.

So from ethnographic film, a tiny subset of documentary, come some propositions about authorship as a complex and negotiated category that can be applied more generally.

### **Voice/s of Documentary: A Vocabulary**

If the abstract noun 'voice' is modified by a variety of adjectives it is possible to talk more precisely about the inter-relationships of different categories of voice. Although Nichols is clearly not talking of an entirely unitary category, with his reference to moiré effects, and acknowledgement that documentary subjects are part of the voice of a film, his argument endorses each film having as *monologic* a voice as possible, reflecting the director's individual subjectivity.

The simplest refinement to Nichols' argument that a film-maker's textualized voice must take precedence over their subjects' could be to argue that each must share the discursive space so that a documentary is literally *equi-vocal*. But this word has connotations of ambiguity in common usage, and is limited as a way of analysing discursive authority in documentary, not least because most documentaries have multiple subjects. Applied to a film like *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) where Davis Guggenheim - the filmmaker - and Al Gore - the primary documentary subject - clearly worked in close collaboration to produce a film that reflects both of them, this term would at least colloquially suggest a film uncertain of its discursive authority.

There are alternative terms to construe vocal relationships between a film-maker and subjects, broadcasters, audience etc. They are discussed below and their usefulness for a revised theory of documentary voice explored.

### Ventriloquic<sup>3</sup> Voice

In discussing documentary authorship, David MacDougall asserts that a film-maker goes 'shifting subjectivities with others' as a 'a *ventriloquist* for ... teachers, parents, friends and heroes'. MacDougall uses the term to suggest how humans learn to speak and to adopt opinions, figures of speech, and aesthetics from others.

Ventriloquist/ventriloquism comes from a Latin root meaning 'to speak from the belly'.<sup>4</sup> In its etymology the term recalls the discourse of feminists such as Helene Cixous, who rejected the tendencies of Rene Descartes and others to separate mind from body, and developed a reintegrated philosophy, 'in which life becomes text out from my body (Cixous 1977 in Cixous 1991: 52). The film-maker and cultural theorist, Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989) similarly asserts that 'women must write through their bodies' (1989: 36). 'Speaking from the belly' is a powerful metaphor for the deep personal investment documentary filmmakers typically have in their films.

But in contemporary usage, ventriloquism refers to an art where a performer throws the perceived source of their voice out from their body to a doll known as a 'dummy'. It has a mixed history as a trope in cinema studies. In analysing the sound-image relations of fictional cinema, Rick Altman's essay 'Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism' (1980), argues that the image track of cinema plays metaphoric 'dummy' to the more fundamentally powerful but often disregarded soundtrack. This overall argument is not helpful to a theory of documentary voice, but some of the ventriloquists' manuals that Altman cites are relevant. One states that: 'All of us have hidden desires that we suppress. The most successful ventriloquists have let these hidden desires be expressed in the personality of their dummies' (Hutton, in Altman 1980 p. 77). Another says of the dummy: 'His voice and personality should be richer and stronger than yours' (Houlden, in Altman 1980 p. 78). At one level, this seems an apt metaphor to describe the way in which interview-based documentaries tend to express the filmmaker's position through the selection and organization of documentary subjects rather than the more direct address of films with extensive narrations. His statement recalls the way Michael Rabiger (2004: 374), film-maker and theorist, describes the choice of an appropriate documentary subject:

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<sup>3</sup> This is a neologism, coined to 'match' other of the adjectives discussed here, also with the -ic suffix, 'of the nature of, pertaining to' *OED*. While it is a clunky term, it is arguably less awkward than the alternate adjectival form which is found in some dictionaries: *ventriloquial*. If readers of this article give the neologism no 'airtime' it can safely be expected to die out!

<sup>4</sup> 1584, from L.L. *ventriloquus*, from L. *venter* (gen. *ventris*) 'belly' + *loqui* 'speak'. Patterned on Gk. *engastrimythos*, lit. 'speaking in the belly', which was not originally an entertainer's trick but rather a rumbling sort of internal speech, regarded as a sign of spiritual inspiration or (more usually) demonic possession. Reference to the modern meaning seems to have begun early in the eighteenth century, and by 1797 it was being noted that this was a curiously inappropriate word to describe throwing the voice. *Ventriloquist* is from 1656; *ventriloquism* is from 1797 (<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?r=2&q=ventriloquy>, accessed 12/02/2007).

You search the world for the freestanding counterparts to your own experience. Finding them, you can communicate how life really is – without any need for self-portraiture.

In these terms a concept of ventriloquic voice could appear to have possibilities to describe the discursive relationship of film-makers and their subjects. But the term ‘dummy’ as the corollary to ‘ventriloquist’, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘without voice ... one who is a mere tool of another’, is too negative to be useful as a way of generally thinking about the relationship between filmmakers and documentary subjects and/or broadcasters.

Bearing this out, a brief search for uses of this trope in other discourses suggests that ventriloquism tends to be used negatively, to indicate an erasure of some sort for persons who *could speak* if given the space (eg from literary studies Le Master 2004). With a focus on documentary voice emerging from multiple inputs ventriloquism and ventriloquic are too ‘loaded’ as terms to use often, although they are evocative for situations where one entity’s expression is subordinated to another.

### **Dialogic Voice**

*Dialogic* is another potential term to talk about the inter-relationships of documentary voice. This is an adjectival/adverbial version of the noun ‘dialogue,’ whose etymology derives from the combination of the Greek word for two and the Greek word for reason, thus a process of sense-making involving ‘two or more’ entities or persons engaged in a conversation, metaphoric or actual (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary*).

David MacDougall uses the word thus:

most critics discuss the authors of films...in terms of an ‘authorial voice’ that stands in solid contradistinction, often dialogically, to the ambiguous and often suppressed voice of others (1998: 274).

This is a pejorative use of the term to suggest a kind of ‘shouting’. In museology and media studies however, ‘dialogic’ is more often used positively, to imply a diminution of authorial prerogative so that others than the primary author can have input into or influence the form of a cultural work. As an example of this, Andrea Witcomb in *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* extols the Museum of Sydney for representing a ‘new museology’ with ‘dialogic interactivity’ (2003: 156) through design that she quotes Alexander and Brereton describing as ‘less a mausoleum of dead cultural artefacts than a kind of electronic layer cake of interpretations capable of being revoked or transformed’ (2003: 158).

Much usage of this term can be directly and indirectly traced back to M.M. Bakhtin, a Soviet literary theorist who first propounded his theory of dialogism in a 1929 essay on Dostoevsky (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981: xxiv). In subsequent decades, and ironically working very largely in isolation, Bakhtin developed this concept, along with many other terms relating back to an underlying metaphor of

voice — eg utterance, polyglossia, heteroglossia, double-voicedness. This work was published posthumously as *The Dialogic Imagination* (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981). For Bakhtin, novels achieved value in creating literally ‘novel’ forms in relation to previously established genres. By extension, dialogism was the ‘characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia ... there is a constant interaction of meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others’ (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981: 458).

This notion of a metaphoric (and to a degree actual) process of dialogue as a way of understanding how documentaries come to assume their final forms is a useful one that periodically will be deployed below. The discourse — written and verbal — between filmmakers and subjects, filmmakers and broadcasters, filmmakers and their colleagues centrally shape the form of documentaries in ways not accounted for in Nichols’ theory.

### **Choric Voice**

Finally, however, the number of different inputs into any given text, and in particular recent developments in the relationship between filmmakers and their audiences are such that a metaphor of the chorus is a valuable addition to a conceptual toolkit of vocal inter-relationships. ‘Choric’ is not a common word in media studies or documentary theory. A literature review around concepts of voice in documentary revealed only one use of this term. In a detailed textual analysis of *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), Stella Bruzzi (2000: 48), refers to ‘a protracted series of interviews with the same friends and colleagues that have proffered choric opinions of Milk throughout’. In this usage, she works with everyday notions of a choir as a group ‘singing from the same song-sheet’.

If it is a truism that all words retain traces of their etymology, then ‘choric’ also holds something of the history of the Greek chorus (*choros* - the abstract ‘object’ of the chorus, *khoreia* - the practice of same, *khoregia* - the underlying institution) from which the word derives. The chorus was one of two fundamental performance elements in classical Greek theatre, the other being the protagonists, played by a professional actor/s. The chorus comprised:

The collective and anonymous presence embodied by an official college of citizens. Its role is to express through its fears, hopes, questions and judgements the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 111)

A Greek chorus, thought to have been located adjacent to the stage, generally consisted of collective speech, music and movement in masks that hid the identity of the individual participants. Many elements of the choral performances such as music were ephemeral, and are now subject to academic debate (eg. Wilson 2000; Ley 2007; McDonald and Walton 2007). Scholars concur, however, that the chorus (*khoregia*) was an institution central to Athenian democracy, in which young men participated for several years as part of their education for full citizenship. Chorus often intoned the perspective of those for whom citizenship was an impossible dream: slaves, foreigners and women (Wilson 2000: 80; Ley 2007: 191).

Peter Wilson says theatre in Athenian society can be understood:

not as if it were a forum for narrow, thinly veiled political pamphleteering for a particular course of action ... but rather more as an institution ... in which could be raised the more unwieldy, problematic, big questions of life in the polis that underlie it but exceed the capabilities of diurnal debate (2000: 67).

Classical Athens was a society with the medium of theatre at the heart of its body politic. Contemporary liberal democracies have a range of audio-visual media imbricated in their political processes. Currently there is a reprise of the choral function in documentary and in other forms such as news journalism and cultural review where the internet facilitates consumer and citizen commentary.

Bruzzi's usage above references the ensemble nature of a chorus. But a choir also has the capacity to meld together the voices of individuals into something with more significance than just the sum of its parts. Choric voice is a way of thinking about inputs that, while perhaps more muted than that of the central author, form part of the overall voice: funding bodies, philanthropists, and members of the audience, especially in versions of documentary which have something of the nature of an ongoing event to them eg *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore and Guggenheim 2006), *The Corporation* (Achbar, Abbott et al. 2003). This concept aids consideration of documentary voice not as an expression of any single individual, but rather as a collection of braids, albeit often and arguably ideally with a director's perspective forming the main channel at the centre of the braid. This proposition will be tested below after noting a separate but related form of theory.

Since the mid-1980s, a field of philosophy has arisen where writers including Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Elizabeth Grosz, John Sallis and Gregory Ulmer have gone back to one of the Platonic dialogues known as *The Timaeus* to construct a branch of scholarship known variously as chora/khora/chorology. There are some resonances in this discourse relating to the notion of the choric developed above, but these will not be canvassed here, as the trope does not centrally refer back to the Greek theatrical chorus which underpins my usage of the term.

### **The Voice of individual documentaries: A vocabulary of inter-relationship applied**

This article to date has considered the interrelationships of the forms of documentary voice and found words from a broader vocal rubric to analyze them. Considerable attention has been paid to the categories 'ventriloquic' and 'dialogic', and the contexts in which they are useful and the term 'choric' has been developed in application to documentary theory. Of the three concepts, choric is the most useful term to think about emerging forms of exhibition and film in which a filmmaker structures reaction and potentially action from an audience.

Vocal interrelations of necessity need to shift according to context. With a focus on individual subjectivity and generally an absence of speaking subjects, the discursive inter-relationships of a film-maker of an art installation with documentary elements is likely to be relatively monologic. By contrast, a film-maker employed by an Indigenous community to express a collective perspective will need to engage in

extensive dialogic processes, and may indeed function as something of a ventriloquist. There are many contemporary instances where a film only comes into being because a subject initiates the process — for example, *Sadness* (Yang and Ayres 1999), *After Maeve* (Cattoni 2006)— and from its inception authorship is explicitly shared in a necessarily dialogic fashion. This is especially the case where the key subject themselves has an established persona as an artist or performer.

In independent documentaries typically commissioned by broadcasters on the basis of a two page synopsis and a two minute ‘teaser’, the voice of the final piece will represent ongoing dialogue between film-makers and commissioning editors. If broadcasters want vibrant partnership with the independent production community, they need the relationship to be more dialogic than ventriloquic. Many broadcasters are aware of this — for instance, Courtney Gibson, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) Head of Arts and Entertainment, spoke in November 2006<sup>5</sup> of noticing established documentary filmmakers responding to the ABC’s then forthcoming policy on ‘balance’ by suppressing their own voices to fit what they thought the broadcaster wanted, resulting in works without resonance or cogency. So at the heart of contemporary documentary practice there is the potential for both collaboration and competition between film-makers and broadcasters. Similar discursive negotiations between film-makers and their subjects are commonplace. The past couple of decades have seen a rolling back of the author’s assumed power in documentary as in other cultural spheres, and a greater focus on the politics of who has the right to tell which stories.

If some of the authority of documentary texts is shared with subjects and broadcasters, the same is also true of the relationship of filmmakers and audiences. This is most obviously expressed through the associated website and online discussions that are today a corollary of many documentaries. One example is Cathy Henkel’s *The Man Who Stole My Mother’s Face* (2002), which considered the impact on her mother’s life of a rape in South Africa several years ago and documented the film-maker’s efforts to secure justice on her mother’s behalf. The website that accompanies the film, [www.hatchling.com.au/face/pages/storycontinues](http://www.hatchling.com.au/face/pages/storycontinues), provides director’s statements, detailed character profiles, behind-the-scenes accounts and information on the theme of sexual assault that underpins the film. The site also contains the remnants of an extended online discussion thread, mainly between Laura Henkel - the main character of the film - and members of the audience who were moved by the film to take their engagement with the text and its underlying issues further. In a film such as *After Maeve* (Cattoni 2006), which follows a family in the year after their ten year old has died in cycling accident, the web elements [www.planetcreature.com](http://www.planetcreature.com) are even more significant. Many of them preceded, and indeed constitute, the broadcast documentary, which forms the key but not the only element of a concatenation of cultural events and outputs around the death that is at the centre of the whole project.

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<sup>5</sup> At the SPAA Fringe conference, Brisbane. Session chaired by the author. No known record or transcript of proceedings.

If Nichols' essay on voice partly responded to some of the more facile declarations in the early days of interview-based documentary that characters were 'speaking for themselves', then in updating this theory to take account of recent developments it would be similarly easy to overstate the extent to which the locus of voice in documentary had shifted in the direction of audience power. In each of the examples cited above, finally it is the filmmaker, and the institutions that have formed a conduit for a filmmaker to come to voice, that determine the degree to which any audience feedback forms part of the overall voice of a piece. The various forms of audience input or agency could be construed as dialogic, although there is a sense implicit in this term of an interchange of equals that overstates the case. By contrast the trope choric suggests that audience feedback fulfills the ancient purpose of the Greek Chorus, representing the 'fears, hopes, questions and judgments and feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community' formally incorporated in the text. There is an ethical dimension to these new forms of voice for film-makers. If an audience is asked in some way to provide a choric dimension, that input needs in some way to be publicly available, to avoid an audience feeling muted, 'given voice' and then muffled without reference.

But if choric is an especially useful concept to understand voice in some emerging forms of documentary, the terms so far discussed are not a hierarchy with choric at the 'top of the tree'. Not all filmmakers wish to explore the potential for choric dimensions to their work. If the categories are seen as descriptive and analytical rather than aspirational, the terms can be applied as required. A key practical and ethical task of the documentary filmmaker is to clarify questions of voice for themselves and others, perhaps most especially the subjects of their documentaries. Managing vocal inter-relationships is more complex the greater the cultural difference between film-maker/s, subjects, audiences and broadcasters. And in such contexts, providing a choric dimension potentially allows a film-maker to express an idiosyncratic and individual perspective, whilst also facilitating the expression of contrary views.

### **Documentary Voice as a summative category: Institutional voice**

Each of the above categories has been applied in relation to the voice of individual documentaries. But as discussed in the introduction, voice also has a collective component. In both his 'voice of documentary' essay and in subsequent taxonomies Bill Nichols defines voice as a distinct characteristic of individual films, even as those singular voices are then grouped together into modes, 'something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself' (2001: 99). In the latest schema there is a suggestion that 'voice' might also be an attribute of institutions, not just of individuals or individual texts:

Every documentary has its own distinct voice ... [that] attests to the individuality of the filmmaker or director or, sometimes, to the determining power of a sponsor or controlling organization. Television news has a voice of its own just as Fred Wiseman or Chris Marker ... does (2001: 99).

This perception can be broadened to form another adjective with which to modify 'voice'. One can borrow from Nichols his definition of voice as the 'moiré-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes' and substitute something like 'an institution's products/programs/films' in place of the noun predicate (i.e. a film's) to think about how voice can also be an expression of groups and institutions. Thus not only does television news have a voice, but so intrinsically do networks/funding bodies/nations/festivals, etc., and these could be considered forms of *institutional* voice. Institutional voice is all the ways that each of the organizations with relevance to documentary film production — broadcasters, government funding bodies, production houses, etc. — 'speak' through the choices they collectively make. This is not to imply that an institution's voice is unitary. Like individuals, institutions have many different registers and can either foster or suppress individual idiosyncratic expression within their overall discursive space.

Charles Guignon (2004) has undertaken an intellectual history of the concept of authenticity and linked this quality to a 'reflective individual who discerns what is genuinely worth pursuing within the social context in which he or she is situated' (p. 155). An institution aware of its overall voice and authentic cultural function in Guignon's terms would set up structures to bring to the public sphere a range of voices not otherwise represented. From this perspective, dissonance as well as harmony, contradiction as well as coherence, diversity within as well as between these institutional utterances become especially valuable:

The expression of unpopular views is especially important for a democratic society, because ... only by playing off a diverse range of views in the ongoing conversation of the community (is it) that the best possible answers can be reached (2004: 160).

Guignon's words have resonance, not only in relation to documentary but in the civic sphere more generally. So, while the voice of each documentary will, to various degrees, reflect multiple inputs rather than a pure essence of a film-maker's subjectivity, a healthy institutional culture allows a wide range of registers to be expressed. Understanding the affordances and impedances that bring some individuals and groups to public voice, and silence and marginalize others, is vital. And the relative weight of individual voices and institutional influences needs to be considered. It may well be, for instance, that many broadcasting systems give too much weight to the chorus of schedulers, commissioning editors, managers and marketers, and not enough to the creative producer/director, such that the widespread assumption in US culture that the maverick voice can always cut through institutional constraints, that Michael Renov identified (1999: 323), simply cannot be sustained. Laws governing the concentration of media ownership, easy access to news archive, the influence of advertising and other commercial influences, free-trade agreements and countervailing regulations to support national as opposed to generic global programming become critical if the range of voices needed for an optimum democracy are to 'cut through'. Anywhere that institutional

voice is so strong there is little possibility of dialogic interchange with individual film-makers, film-makers risk becoming ventriloquic ‘dummies’ to networks, funding bodies, etc. By contrast, a thriving and diverse set of institutional voices of documentary could facilitate the field of documentary playing a choric function in relation to the collective ‘voice of the nation’ as represented by parliament.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, institutional schemes designed to ‘bring to voice’ groups that would otherwise be muted are valuable. Typically such schemes will be of particular importance for a limited period. A good example is the Australian Film Commission (AFC)’s Women’s Film Fund (WFF), explicitly established in 1976 to give women a more equal say in the emerging independent filmmaking arena. After increased filmmaking by women the WFF ceased production funding in 1989, continuing some support for professional development until 1992 (FitzSimons 2002). In 1993 the AFC set up what was then called the Aboriginal Unit (now known as the Indigenous Unit) ([www.afc.gov.au/funding/indigenous](http://www.afc.gov.au/funding/indigenous)). Hopefully a time will come when specific funding for Aboriginal filmmakers can no longer be justified because of their evident equal representation in the film industry and other groups will have their chance – Muslim citizens and refugees perhaps. Refugees in Australian detention camps sewing their lips together in 2002, was a powerful visual symbol that at a collective national level certain groups are still ‘denied voice’ and could benefit from special strategies<sup>7</sup> to be brought to voice.

### **Documentary Voice as a summative category: Ontologic Voice**

In the discussion above the overall voice of documentary as a cultural form, or what could be called its ‘ontologic’ voice, is not canvassed. This is a question of what the particular ‘grain’ of documentary as a whole might be, to use Roland Barthes’ term for ‘the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue’ (1977: 179 - 89). Hayden White (1987) undertook such a task regarding narrative history, entitled *The Content of the Form*. Defining the ontologic voice of documentary is beyond the scope of this article, although I have previously undertaken something of this task (FitzSimons 2008). Suffice to say that the various generic subsets of Nichols typology – the poetic, the expository etc – could be located within this part of a conceptual genealogy. The cinematic mode of documentary address, vis a vis the televisual, and whatever adjective describes works with an online or exhibition component, become further ways of dividing this category. At this point the genealogy of various kinds of documentary

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<sup>6</sup> A recent example of this potential was the discussion occasioned in Australia and elsewhere by *An Inconvenient Truth* Gore, A. and D. Guggenheim (2006). *An Inconvenient Truth. Hollywood, Calif., Paramount,, from [www.climatecrisis.net/in](http://www.climatecrisis.net/in) counterpoint *The Great Global Warming Swindle* (Durkin 2007) and associated broadcast discussion panels and their relation to emerging government policy on climate change.*

<sup>7</sup> I am sewing my lips together.  
That which you are denying us  
we should never have  
had to ask for. Anonymous, Excerpt from Poem entitled *Asylum*, First published in *The Age*, May 12<sup>th</sup> 2002 [www.refugeebuddies.com](http://www.refugeebuddies.com), accessed July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

voice starts to become like a family reunion with cousins at various removes. But here too diversity is valuable: the range of ways that the documentary impulse is expressed in established and emerging forms — in ethnography, on the net, as part of art practice, through groups newly coming to voice — becomes vital to the form retaining the seeds of its continual future reinvention.

### **Conclusion – Braided Channels**

The task undertaken in this article has no natural limits: further adjectives with which to discuss voice in documentary could be located or coined.<sup>8</sup> The fundamental position of speech in this article is that of a reflective practitioner; its purpose is to energize practice. Rather than seeing a film-maker's voice as a singular, individualized category, it is more fruitful to see it as braided, the nature and relation of those braids depending upon a particular context. And to understand that in most versions of documentary there will be forms of voice other than just the film-makers to be expressed. The point is not to create an alternate taxonomy to those extant in documentary theory— Nichols (1991; 1994; 2001), Renov (1993) Plantinga (1997), Corner (2001) — which have been the dominant project of this field of cultural theory, nor a warp to the weft of existing typologies. Filmmakers need words to describe and analyze the processes they are engaged as part of a fruitful reflective practice. Vocal inter-relations cannot simply be read from completed texts and detailed accounts of processes of 'coming to voice' can be valuable in the field of documentary studies (FitzSimons 2004; MacDougall 2006).

Finally, to return briefly to the complex cultural politics of non-Aboriginal filmmakers including Indigenous perspectives in their documentaries that was one of the triggers to this article. Any assertion that the film-maker's textualised voice always needs to be of a 'higher controlling type than the voices of interviewees' now seems simplistic. But Nichols' argument about film-makers needing not to abdicate their own view has continuing validity. Marcia Langton, the eminent Australian activist, anthropologist and actor described her impulse to writing '*Well I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television ...*' thus:

I hope my approach will make it possible and less difficult for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, including film and video makers, to say and do what they would like to say and do(1993: 9).

I concur and agree too with Langton that 'The easiest and most natural form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible' (1993: 24). Ensuring an interplay of different voices across a range of documentary texts, as well as within particular films, is one way to avoid this, in a manner that recalls Ginsburg's invocation of the 'parallax' as a way to develop depth of representation. Encouraging various forms of choric voice and giving discursive space to that input

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<sup>8</sup> eg The truly collective mode of writing of wikis in the print-based universe raises the possibility of a 'demologic voice' (ie written by the people without any central individual author), that may or may soon, have an equivalent in documentary production.

is another.<sup>9</sup> Nothing in this article should be read as a disavowal however of the value of personal expression or what can be thought of as the idiosyncratic voice, especially when it encourages authentic contribution to our democracy.

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<sup>9</sup> In producing FitzSimons, T. (2002 - 05). *Channels of History - a social history exhibition*. Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Regions. – which included substantial Indigenous content - I found that providing for an element of choric voice through encouraging handwritten audience feedback enabled clearer expression of my personal perspective, while at the same time creating space for alternate views from the public.

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