Writing the 'Real'/ Really Writing

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In this article I explore the ‘idea’ of the script and its interpretation as a documentary film. Can writing be central to a documentary project’s creative and expressive pre-vision? And why does a frisson of anxiety and suspicion pervade some of the discussion circling the notion of the documentary screenplay?

The emergence of observational cinema around 1960 created a profound impact on notions of documentary authenticity, truth and modes of storytelling – including documentary screenwriting. Forty years on, this impact continues to resonate across a spectrum of constituencies. Due in part to its particular aesthetic codes - mobile handheld camera style, absence of narration ("narration" is used here to describe voice-over), use of available light, long takes etc – there is a tendency to position observational/direct cinema and cinéma vérité documentary at the apex of a hierarchy of non-fiction film styles. Witness the 2004 Sydney Film Festival program notes for the screening of Dying at Grace (2003), a film about terminally ill patients by veteran Canadian observational filmmaker Allan King. In praising King’s film as a “true’ documentary”, the program notes valorise the filmmaker’s observational technique for the absence of explicit marks of authorship or mediation:

Using neither voice-over, narration nor interviews, King just spends time with the patients, their loved ones and their caretakers…not only is it profound and profoundly moving, but it is a potent reminder of the power of ‘true’ documentary to capture the human condition as no other art form can. (SFF Program & Booking Guide 2004: 50)

Rupture/Obsolescence

One outcome of the arrival of observational/direct cinema was a rupture with the concept of pre-visualising the ‘real’ and, by default, the documentary screenplay. If the filmmaker was able to ‘capture’ reality as it unpredictably ‘unfolded’ before the camera, where was the requirement to pre-visualise? Thus, where previously the screenplay was an integral element of a production, it became redundant in this new mode of documentary filmmaking. Dai Vaughan has described how the development of production technologies allowing for observational/direct cinema impacted on ideas about technique, and in particular the value of the script:

Almost overnight it became possible to shoot synch with portable equipment; and this, combined with the gradually improved resolution of film emulsions, swung the balance in favour of 16mm as a professional gauge. This in turn meant less expensive film stock, with the result that higher shooting ratios were considered acceptable. The script finally became obsolete. (Vaughan 1999:14)

Vaughan’s notion of the script becoming ‘obsolete’ during this period is similar to Canadian documentarian Peter Wintonick’s description of this historical process in his documentary Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment (1999):

… a brave new wave of filmmakers threw away their tripods, burned their scripts and killed off the dinosaurs of old style documentary… they shot first and discovered the story later in the editing room. (Wintonick 1999)

William Rothman has noted, using the generic cinéma vérité, that this kind of filming which involves “improvisatory
encounters with the world, by chance and whim (the filmmaker’s and the world’s”) also brought with it a break “with the discipline of composing the film in advance, the yoking of the film to envisioning or imagining” (Rothman 1996: 89). Yet the observational is only one of a number of modes of documentary filmmaking (Nichols 1991). For other forms such as hybridised authored documentary, writing as an envisioning or an imagining can be central to a project’s creative and expressive strategy. Production theorists rarely remark on this; indeed, writing’s potentiality as an interpretive and pre-visualising agent in non-fiction films has generally been under-theorised. Where production theorists do acknowledge the role of the script in documentary production, much of the commentary on the function of documentary screenwriting fails to take into account its imbrication in the creative process of imagining a future film. Instead, a kind of anxiety prevails about the notion of imagining a documentary as a script. British script consultant David Wingate has even argued that the term ‘script’, with its suggestions of fiction and its devices, should be excised from documentary filmmaker’s lexicon:

I think we should ban all the fiction manuscript terms from documentary development and production. So for me there is no such thing as a documentary “script” or “treatment” or “synopsis”. These are very useful fiction terms but are useless in a documentary context… Although an occasional few documentaries can be pre-structured in development, for most documentaries it is unwise, untruthful – I think unprofessional – to do so. (Wingate 2001: 18-19)

Production theorist Michael Rabiger also reveals concerns about the degree of pre-visualising a documentary practitioner may fruitfully engage in when he writes:

… a modern documentary is an improvisation fashioned from real-life materials, so trying to write a very detailed script would rob the result of spontaneity by forcing participants into the role of actors. (Rabiger 1998: 207)

A Creative Treatment

Describing a documentary as an “improvisation” suggests the immediacy and unpredictability of an unfolding actuality. It does not easily allow for the creative writing processes involved in works that might be described as hybridised authored documentary. Yet Kochburg in his discussion of authorship and documentary has noted that some documentary filmmakers, rather than opt for a position of self-effacement (as in the observational), “…have a recognisable aesthetic voice in their work” (Kochburg 2002: 49). Certainly all documentary films can be considered authored in the sense that their construction reflects both a point of view and the agency of a maker. However, I am using the term in this essay to discuss works that draw on a range of techniques to represent the filmmaker/author’s negotiation with the world - techniques that might include the use of more experimental or fictional strategies signifying the intervention or controlling presence of the filmmaker in Grierson’s much quoted dictum, “the creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1966: 13).

In Unmade Beds (1997) a documentary about single New Yorkers looking for love, UK writer/director NicholasBarker employs a potent visual style that suggests careful (pre-) consideration. Barker’s innovative approach to pre-visualising the film is at the core of his documentary process; the social actors appearing in the film perform scripted versions of their own life stories:

We filmed the four principle characters over seven months on a camcorder. I made transcripts of everything they said and collated, edited them down to a film script… I certainly don’t claim to be objective, this is highly subjective filmmaking, but it was based on the truths that seemed potent to me. (Kauffman 2006)

In a documentary like Unmade Beds, writing is used to develop the potential for innovative representational strategies while at the same time creating a document on which the production can be based. Brian Hill’s documentary Feltham Sings (2002)takes Barker’s writing strategy further. For the film, which explores the experiences of young males imprisoned in
Feltham, the largest young offenders’ prison in Europe, Hill collaborated with poet Simon Armitage, musician Errol Francis, ‘musical documentary’. Armitage wrote the lyrics, drawing on interviews recorded over several months with the inmates. Hill, discussing the writing process for the film at the *Documentary: the Non-Conformists* Symposium (Sydney 2004), related how when two of the documentary subjects refused the songs written for them by Armitage judging them as “shit”, they were given the option to write their own, and did. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, this highly styled, scripted documentary was produced by Roger Graef, a British pioneer of observational filmmaking. British theorist Brian Winston has described Graef’s documentary methodology as “the purest of direct cinema modes. However complex the topic, he eschews interviews and narration…the style of these films is minimally interventionist” (Winston 1995: 208 cited in Bruzzi 2000:69). Possibly Graef’s best known work is the series *Police* (1981) which observed the operations of the Thames Valley Police.

**Pre-vision**

Can observational films be pre-written, and to what degree is writing a useful element of the development and production process? Although some preliminary research may be carried out prior to production, for observational works the filming period represents the most significant stage of the research process. Australian observational filmmaker Bob Connolly succinctly summarises the different kind of writing he asserts is demanded by this form of filmmaking:

> We do not operate from scripts because what we are after cannot be scripted. So our treatments involve no more than a set of applied criteria: inherent conflict, strong characters, an analytical framework to support the application of a wider thematic line to the unfolding events… I’m inclined to think now that if, at the beginning of a project, the narrative line is clear and running, then you’re too late!” (Connolly cited in Graham 1999: xxvi)

However, in Australia, most observational/cinéma vérité filmmakers are required to ‘write up’ their production concepts in an extended form when seeking finance for their productions. Tom Zubrycki’s *Molly and Mobarak* (2003) provides a useful insight into the variety of potential relationships between writing, research and visualising for this style of documentary. The film charts the romance between a young woman and an Afghan refugee in a country town in NSW against the background of the Federal government’s refugee policy. In order to raise finance for the film, Zubrycki wrote a set of imagined sequences describing characters, locations, action and political context. These sequences were based on preliminary research he conducted over a brief period in the country town of Young, where the filming eventually took place. In the proposal it is the sociological and political context that is the significant information:

April 2002. Chinaman’s Picnic Ground, Young. A group of ninety young Afghan men are welcomed by a group of town locals who have organised a “Welcome Barbecue”. The Afghans have been living in town for 6 months, but this is the first time they’ve been to an event of this kind.

The locals are a cross-section of the ‘concerned’ middle-class of the town. There are teachers from the local high school, a few social workers, some older women wearing Amnesty t-shirts, and the TAFE co-ordinator with a clipboard signing-up people for English classes. Also present is the Imam from the Mosque encouraging the new arrivals to join his prayer meetings.
Zubrycki wrote the treatment in order to obtain financial backing from the broadcaster, SBS, rather than to necessarily clarify his ideas for the film:

"The writing for Molly and Mobarak was largely predicated on the need to acquire some sort of financial support for the film which meant that conversations I’d had with SBS grew into the need to put something down on paper. I think that in order to be certain of getting financial support I probably overwrote the treatment because it was based on research I conducted over a week in Young. It was an idea for the film that came to me after just that one week. Had I written the treatment after several weeks more research I’m sure it would have been different. (Zubrycki interviewed by Delofski, June 2004, Sydney)"

Although he made notes during filming about the kinds of sequences he was hoping for in the documentary, his creative process did not rely on detailed writing such as a script:

"I think in this kind of work which is essentially an exploration which is largely empirical you reinvent and rewrite the film everyday. Scripting takes place essentially in your head, in your imagination. You’re redefining the idea because that changes as well and sharpens as you go on reconceptualising the film. (Zubrycki June 2004)"

Extrapolating from Zubrycki’s process in Molly and Mobarak it could be argued that written materials for this style of documentary do not appear to be deeply related to the conceptual development of the film-to-come. Perhaps filming for such a project without the requirement to write intentionally for a broadcaster or funding agency might also have been achieved with a series of written lists or random notes relating to location, character and focus. What a treatment will offer a broadcaster or funding agency is an idea of the style of film which may eventuate, its subject matter, and perhaps a
suggestion of character and potential narrative structure.

**Imagining the ‘real’**

Analysing the relationship between research and writing for hybridised authored documentaries reveals that there is a more direct relationship between research, development and writing; that writing is closely linked to the conceptual and creative development of the project. Australian filmmaker Rosemary Hesp’s short documentary *Relative Strangers* (1998) is a stylised exploration of the ways in which the film’s subject repeats the history of abandonment he suffered as a child after discovering as a teenager that his sister is in fact his mother. His father, whom he has never met, briefly enters his life when he is a young man, only to disappear again. Later he learns that his father has committed suicide. The film concludes with the revelation that the subject of the film has also had a child but that he too has lost contact with her; that he has somehow repeated his own experience of abandonment on his daughter.

In the documentary, the subject’s non-synchronous monologue is played out against a visual tapestry of carefully constructed sets of layered images designed to signify an emotionally repressed memory. For example, as the subject speaks about his discovery of his mother’s true identity, a cupboard door opens to reveal darkness within. On the door of the cupboard, an image of a baby is projected through a muslin curtain gently undulating in a simulated ‘breeze’. On the inside of the open door there’s another image projected – a young woman, possibly the mother. The images are moving, hazy, slippery. As images they are not referents to an ‘actual’ world, but rather the world of emotional memory. Unlike an observational film such as *Rats in the Ranks* (1996) which presents what the filmmaker literally “sees” through the viewfinder, *Relative Strangers* attempts to visually express both the subject’s memory of the past and the filmmaker’s views on this: the subject’s seeming lack of feeling, and the filmmaker’s views about the subject’s emotional containment.

The aesthetic and writing strategies for *Relative Strangers* evolved out of a particular set of considerations and imperatives. In conceptualising the film as an elegiac account of loss and repression, Hesp was influenced by the visual strategies employed in an earlier work, *At Sea* (1997). This short documentary film explores the grief a mother experiences long into her life, after the death of her child at sea. Grief is powerfully visualised through a series of treated images such as oranges being peeled and prepared for marmalade. Hesp set out to develop a film which, like *At Sea*, refused the central physical presence of the story’s main protagonist. Instead she explores how the emotional essence of her subject’s story might be distilled both visually and aurally. Her conceptual process involved writing a script based on a research interview which became the narrative spine of the film. Hesp, who wrote and directed the film while studying at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, acknowledges that prior to writing the script for *Relative Strangers* her views on documentary writing had been shaped by an understanding of observational filmmaking practices and her former profession as a television news journalist:

I had this interview on audiotape so I set about writing a script. This was completely foreign to me and very hard work because in television news you just go out, a bit like observational filming, with a few ideas in your head and try to find the material… I have to confess I thought that writing a documentary meant writing the narration for a film. I didn’t actually know you could write documentaries, I didn’t actually know you could write a script the way you can a fiction film… so the idea of sitting down and plotting it out and writing it scene by scene was a very hard thing for me, it was like reinventing the wheel in my head. (Hesp interviewed by Delofski, July 2004, Sydney)

The first two drafts of the *Relative Strangers* script reveal the ways in which the concept developed, and the role of research and writing in relation to this. Ultimately, the script is an embodiment of that relationship. For the first draft Hesp transcribed her interview with the subject, edited sections and re-ordered them as a series of what she describes as “grabs” which told a story: “…a bit like you do when you’re writing a news story” (Hesp July 2004). These sections were written up in story order together with some basic ideas for images reflecting the content of the interview. For example, she suggests in this draft that when the subject discusses his memories of Christmas, we will see a Christmas tree:

Simon describes what family meant to him as a child.

Int lounge room/studio
Close-up of star on top of Christmas tree. Slow pan down a conservatively decorated tree to a few presents at the bottom

Simon voice-over
My earliest memory is of a Christmas.

(Hesp 1998, *Relative Strangers*, 1st draft script)

However, preceding this opening sequence of his imagined history, Hesp introduces another image - the subject shaving in the bathroom:
Int Simon’s bathroom
Simon is shaving with an electric razor in front of the bathroom mirror

(Hesp 1998, *Relative Strangers*, 1st draft script)

In this first exposition of the film’s idea there is little emotional texture or indication of style, although the camera direction “slow pan down a conservatively decorated tree” suggests a developing idea. The design of the finished film which features layered slide projections onto objects and photographs does not appear on the page either. Yet, the juxtaposition of the images of Simon shaving and a Christmas tree from his childhood is strangely suggestive.

*Relative Strangers* is a film which attempts to deliver its meanings through the construction of stylised metaphors. By the next draft, there has been a small shift in the expressive aspects of language used which begins to suggest the finished film. The subject of the film is represented through the intersection of his edited monologue and sets of designed images representing memory and its repression. There is a strong sense of the subject as someone who, because of the specifics of his childhood circumstances, has grown to become a man who does not, or cannot, “know” himself. The film is replete with layered images suggesting the fragility of memory and thus self-knowledge. Scene 1 sets up this potential using the metaphor of his hazy, dissolving bathroom image. In contrast to the first draft of the script, the descriptive language in this second draft begins to offer a more definite idea of how this film may develop conceptually as we learn that the room the subject is shaving in, is “mystic, damp and mysterious”. Nor can we see his reflection in the mirror so easily. Early ideas for the expressive use of sound are also apparent in this draft:

Sc1 Int Simon’s Flat

Simon is shaving with an electric razor in front of the bathroom mirror. It’s misty damp and mysterious. His reflection in the mirror is not clear. The shot dissolves into steam.

SFX: Loud then dulled electric shaver.

Simon describes his identity in terms of his family background.

(Hesp 1998 *Relative Strangers*, 2nd draft script)

The process of writing *Relative Strangers* was, in some ways, similar to writing a fiction script in that it proceeded through a number of drafts, each stage further clarifying both the film’s concept and the ways in which it might be visualised through cinematography and design. Unlike Zubrycki, who wrote the treatment for *Molly and Mobarak* not in order to pre-visualise the film for himself but rather to satisfy both broadcaster and funding agency that there was a concept to finance, Hesp acknowledges the value of the scripting process for *Relative Strangers* as an important element of both its conceptual development and as a means of communicating ideas with the other key creative collaborators – designer and cinematographer:

The script was everything in the making of this film - I was making a documentary but I was making it like
a fiction film. Without the script I wouldn’t know where to go in making a film like Relative Strangers. The script provided a way of discussing this with both the designer and cinematographer and meant that they could contribute their ideas too. (Hesp July 2004)

Each style of documentary filmmaking demands its own writing process and within different sub-genres of the form there can be markedly different approaches. For writer/director Kriv Stenders, the processes of writing and shooting the documentary Motherland were not so distinctly demarcated as they were for Hesp in Relative Strangers. Instead there was a more evolutionary relationship: one which meant that different stages of the project’s development included both writing and filming - or, as Stenders refers to it, a “dialogue” between each representational mode. Shot in black and white, Motherland combines various documentary modes including the interactive, performative and reflexive. Style or technique serves important functions in relation to the discourse operating in the film as the filmmaker explores his own memory of a ‘golden’ childhood through his grandmothers’ memories of migration from Latvia and settlement in Australia. Initially, the script for Motherland began as a series of ideas and images:

I wrote down these ideas, images, a crude set of notes eg just a word or an idea, like the words “two grandmothers” or a line of dialogue or a memory of something I heard my grandmothers say about a particular memory. It was also a shot list of images: eg slow-motion shots of my grandmother staring into the camera blinking or jumping on the trampoline in the back yard… just images. (Stenders interviewed by Delofski, June 2004, Sydney)

For a film exploring memory, Stenders, interestingly, does not choose to use documentary images as the basis for his film’s recollections. Rather he constructs his film memory around a series of exquisitely framed and composed faux archival material, vignettes of re-constructed childhood moments. Shot on 16mm film, each image resonates with intensity, the blacks saturated, the whites glowing. The re-enactments/vignettes contain no dialogue and the filmmaker does not appear concerned with verisimilitude in the sense of historically accurate detail or what might be termed a documentary realism (itself derived from the conventions of observational cinema). Instead, the vignettes represent an ‘emotional memory’, or an emotional point of view. However, there is something so excessive in their representation of an idealised past, so golden even as expressive black and white re-creations, that their status as unproblematic or transparent memories becomes heightened and thus questionable.

The interviews with Stenders’ grandmothers are the heart of the documentary, yet they are not always treated visually in a typical documentary interview style. The camera is not static. It glides backwards and forwards from left to right across the elderly women’s faces in close-up as they speak. The filmmaker is less concerned with providing the audience with a sync sound account of the past (and thus an indexical link to the ‘real’), than attempting to express something of the speakers’ lives by offering us a close and somehow lyrical examination of their faces. The combination of the different stylistic and aesthetic choices: camera movement, black and white stock, framing, composition suggests that the filmmaker/author is inferring something about these people’s lives beyond what they are literally expressing on screen. Motherland seeks to combine expressivity with other rhetorical and aesthetic functions in order to represent reality as the emotional texture of memory, and as Carl Plantinga has discussed, these functions may be a means to both “affect the spectator emotionally and perceptually” (Plantinga 1997: 147).

In researching, writing and shooting the film, Stender’s developed a methodology which was similar to the process he had developed earlier in his career while creating music videos. This involved collecting visual ideas intuitively without necessarily organising them thematically or structurally from the beginning in script form, as Hesp had for Relative Strangers. He recorded interviews with his grandmothers whose memories were the subject of his film and from these interviews developed a collection of small scenes which he filmed:

I decided to shoot some re-enactments of my grandmothers performing various acts but thought that unlike docudrama re-enactments of the time which were clumsy and clichéd we should make them totally integrated into the footage, very cinematic and make the film about the nature of memory, the essence of
memory. (Stenders, interviewed by Delofski, June 2004, Sydney)

Editing these scenes together to music, Stenders was able to discern potential linkages and juxtapositions in the material as well as lacunae. He describes the editing as a form of writing which revealed “gaps” for which he began to literally write scenes:

I thought, how can I fill in these gaps here so I wrote scenes – they were more like episodes, what Kubrick calls “non-submersible units”, like floating contained minifilms, little pods, little compartments that could be moved and shifted … I wrote them down in script form and I also storyboarded them. Everything was feeding itself. Rather than a cut and dried process of sitting down at a desk and writing it there was this wonderful symbiosis of shooting, talking, drawing, writing, so it was writing in all its forms rather than the literal idea of sitting down at the keyboard. (Stenders June 2004)

While the greater part of Motherland was shot in Australia, Stenders also shot material in Latvia - imagery related to his grandmothers’ earlier lives but which he did not necessarily know how it might work in either the final script or film. Returning to Australia he wrote a script based on his research in both countries – research that included the re-enactments he had shot, script ideas that had developed from that material and also the Latvian material. The script was ‘traditional’ in that it conformed to a format which included scene numbers and the kind of detail one might expect to find in a drama script, in a similar fashion to Hesp’s script for Relative Strangers. However, the process differed radically from Hesp’s in that it was the act of writing down or transcribing scenes which Stenders had already shot that allowed him to visualise those images or scenes that had not been shot and which would later be written into the script submitted to the Australian Film Commission:

I worked on an intuitive level with a very strict framework and it was the framework which allowed the visualisation to happen. By framework I mean a literal narrative framework. For example I was writing scenes in the film that had been already shot together with scenes that hadn’t been shot – it was literally one of the most creative processes I’ve enjoyed. (Stenders June 2004)

Rothman has noted, as indeed have many documentary filmmakers working with scripts, that there is often a tension between the visualisation process in its scripted form and its realisation as a film, that the editing phase of a project may produce a result not necessarily directly in accord with its pre-visualisation:

[The script] can never fully determine a film in its concrete reality. No moment of any film can be completely envisioned in advance. The actual filming transforms the screenplay in ways that are not perfectly predictable. (Rothman 1996: 90)

Although Rothman is writing here of fiction, his argument that filming can “transform” a screenplay obtains even greater potency in a discussion of documentary, with its use of social actors, found locations and other variables. As Stenders discovered when editing his film, the script for Motherland did not deliver the film he had envisaged. Both the rhythm and structure of a script may work on the page, but translated or (re-)interpreted into concrete images and sound, different resonances and relationships may become apparent which can affect the final representation of the research, the documentary film:

The structure in the script didn’t work, it lacked cohesion and trajectory. Individually things were great but put together it didn’t work, it was dry, so self-obsessed, so pretentious. So we started breaking it down again. This is why editing is thrilling. It’s ultimately writing and it’s alchemical as well because there are things that happen in the editing you could never predict or never write, unexplained things. What we realised we had to do was follow an abstract emotional line … once we’d found a running order that was right we could see it. We were always dealing more with emotions than intellectual ideas, not a polemic
but an emotional landscape to map or navigate through. (Stenders June 2004)

However, although the predicted structure for *Motherland* changed between writing and filming, the emotional tone present in the completed film is strongly indicated in the script. The writing is spare and is not descriptive in an empirical sense. Rather, it is the phrasing and rhythms that begin to suggest the emotional texture of the film to come:

**VECMAMIN VOICE-OVER**

My heart say somehow go and see. Only I am very frightened. How it will be after when I see everything change. Maybe I will be very happy when I come back. I don’t know.

**SHOTS OVER VOICE-OVER**

Tilt down on to a little girl who has her back to us and is looking into a forest.

The little girl’s face. Her eyes move.

A row of birch trees. A cart drives past.

**VECMAMIN walks away from the camera down the road.**

(Stenders 1993 *Motherland: 4th draft script* )

**Conclusion**

What becomes apparent when exploring the function of writing in relation to these various documentary modes is that each style of documentary will demand its own approach to interpreting research and imagining the film-to-come. For an observational film, a script is redundant. The research period prior to shooting will more than likely be quite short, and the most significant research will invariably be conflated into the filming. Filmmakers working in this mode may, of course, be obliged to conjure up a film-to-come on the page by a broadcaster or funding agency – but screenwriting is not a necessary creative imperative. Other kinds of documentaries, operating within a less actual and perhaps more imagined terrain, will be based on scripts. Filmmakers working in this way will use the script as a means to both interpret research and to reveal to themselves the creative potential of the research. In some cases the research and writing may precede the filming, in others there may be a more dialogic relationship between the two creative activities. Acknowledging that different styles of documentary filmmaking ‘summon up’ different approaches to screenwriting ultimately liberates the practitioner from the tyranny of a hierarchy of the ‘real’.

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**Filmography**

*At Sea* (1997) Penny Fowler-Smith, AFTRS, Australia


*Dying at Grace* (2003) Allan King, Canada

*Feltham Sings* (2002) Brian Hill, Central Films, UK

*Molly and Mobarak* (2003) Tom Zubrycki, Jotz Productions, Australia

*Motherland* (1994) Kriv Stenders, Australia
Rats in the Ranks (1996) Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, Film Australia and Arundel Films, Australia

Relative Strangers (1998) Rosemary Hesp, AFTRS, Australia

Unmade Beds (1997) Nicholas Barker, New Yorker Films, USA

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