BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

(Speculating on the Documentary)

John Hughes

METRO # 136 (2003)

John Hughes trained as a news cameraman with the ABC before turning to the world of independent film making where his documentaries have been remarkable for their social and political content as well as their stylistic and visual experimentation. His credits include *Menace, Traps, All That Is Solid, One Way Street (Fragments For Walter Benjamin), River of Dreams,* and *After Mabo.* John also directed the feature *What I Have Written* based on a novel by John A Scott. He recently completed a four year term as Commissioning Editor For Documentary at the SBS.

Paul Davies: What is the documentary script? Is it a kind of contradiction in terms- given that documentaries sometimes are observational and only really exist in the film form first?

John Hughes: There is a tradition of the observational documentary but it's only one tradition. There's obviously an absolutely central tradition of the carefully, skillfully crafted documentary script from Joris Ivens and Grierson on… But the term 'script' is- in this context- a kind of generic term.

Paul Davies: Then is it more accurate to say that what you start with first is the 'documentary treatment'? Which sometimes of course bears very little relationship to what ends up on the screen. And may be just a process you go through to open up the money box at some funding body?

John Hughes: Well the treatment is an inherent part of the process. Because in a sense you're writing all the time.

Paul Davies: I remember Pat Laughren giving a paper at the Woodford Festival recently where he claimed that writing a documentary was really about writing a series of begging letters- first to the funding bodies to get the money to make it, then to the people you want to be in it…

John Hughes: That's stretching it a bit to consider the release form as part of the process of documentary writing. Or indeed signing cheques…(laughter).

Paul Davies: I think Pat was joking (sort of).

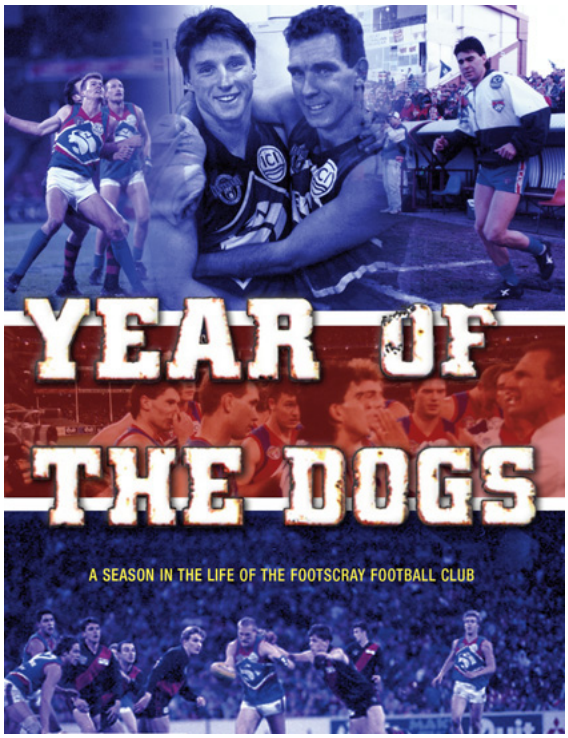
John Hughes: Different people work in different ways. And everybody produces different genres of writing at various stages of the production of the documentary. In the case of *Menace* (and I don't think this has fundamentally changed over the period I've been working), there are much finer distinctions between what is written and what the genre of the document is called. But recently, ABC and SBS for example, are saying they don't want well developed proposals. What they want is very short outlines of an idea and if they like that they'll tell you about how they think it should proceed from there. Both networks now have development money for documentary (something which has been very difficult to get in the past) and part of that is about a shift that seems to be taking place where the desire of television is occupying some of the territory that has previously been occupied by film filmmakers themselves in producing critical or

observational intervention in the culture.

Paul Davies: So when you had your hat on as head of SBS documentary and people are coming along with their projects, what is it that you were looking for out of a particular proposal or treatment ?

John Hughes: If we can take a step back for a moment - let's say that an early document is a 'Proposal'- it's the description of the project - a few pages giving some background of the material that they want to work with and some information about what the narrative strategies are and what the treatment idea is - all of that is what you might call ' The Proposal'. If it's a reasonably thought-out Proposal it will have a treatment element as part of it. Which is not necessarily a synopsis of how the film will appear on the screen - that depends on the material it's dealing with. If it's dealing with an event that's unfolding in the present, then all the treatment can talk about is how it proposes to engage with those unfolding events.

Paul Davies: So something like *Year Of The Dogs* for example is going to be a film that follows a footy team through a season. But it's impossible to predict what will happen to the team… and therefore what the film will be about?

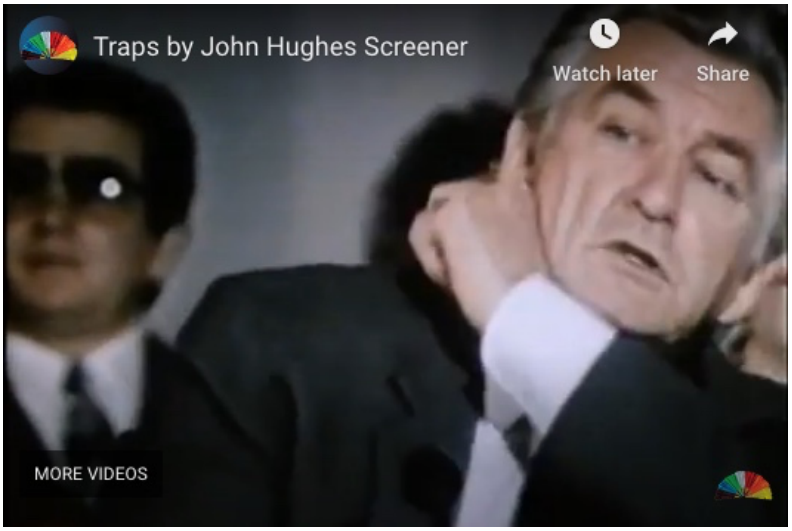


John Hughes: Yes, but the proposal is not going to be persuasive unless it's able to give you the information about what the context is and what's at stake for the team. Why it is likely to work dramatically.

Paul Davies: So you're looking for the dramatic potential in any given idea?

John Hughes: You're looking for engaging story elements certainly. But you're also looking for what is the pertinence of it. What does it have to say that is insightful more generally about the culture of the place. So - if they want to follow events during the course of a year in this particular football club then the question is why? And the available answers are "Well because they're really amusing people and they're great to watch." Okay, that's fine. That's one approach. Or its "Because the issues the football club are dealing with has much broader significance" . There are any number of possibilities.

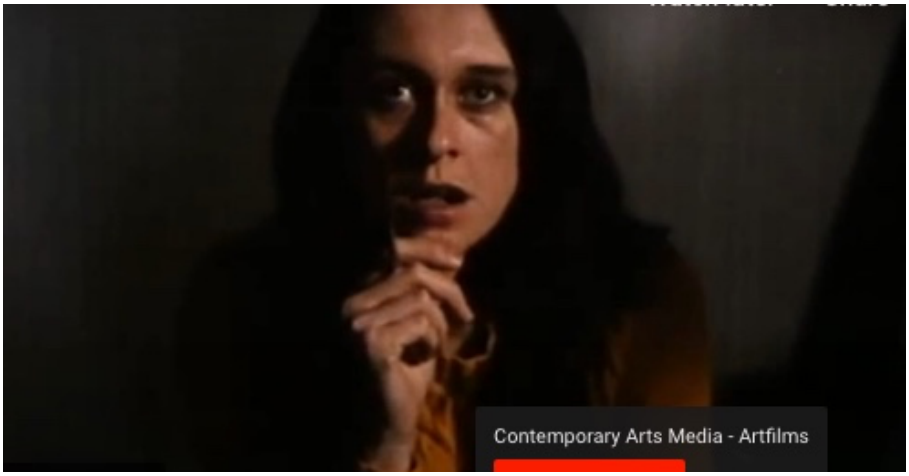
Paul Davies: So in a film like *Traps* say, the subject is the Australian Labour Party and the way it is transformed by a key player like Bob Hawke, and the moments around which you build that story are things like the ALP conference in 1984 etc.



Prime Minister Bob Hawke shocked by an exploding lightbulb
at the 1984 Labour Party Conference – *Traps* (1985)

John Hughes: Well *Traps* is a particular case because it's explicitly about trying to play with a mix of fiction and non-fiction. So it's a complicated example. But it's interesting to note that during the making of that film we were writing all the time, continually coming up with possible sequences to tell certain stories that were pertinent to what was going on around us in those months between 1983

and 1984. And that's one way that documentary script writing works: in that you will always be trying to find - in the material that you're dealing with - treatment ideas to get on screen what you think is important about the subject you've chosen to film.



Caz Howard as "The Journalist" in *Traps*

TRAPS: In 1983 the Hawke Labor government came to power, establishing an administration of 'consensus' and was re-elected in '85. Carolyn Howard plays a fictional journalist, pursuing investigative political stories through actual tally rooms and newsrooms, meeting journalists, politicians and artists. Evoking histories of the Cold War and the events of November 11, 1975. *Traps* is a provocative blend of fact and fiction, news and disinformation, conspiracy theory and the packaging of politics.

Paul Davies: And then there's this thing you once called the 'Speculative Documentary'…?

John Hughes: That was about one way of thinking through this question, because one of the factors at that time (and it remains a problem) is that people use the term 'documentary' so generally that it becomes very difficult to talk sensibly about it because there are so many different approaches involved. So the term 'speculative documentary' was an invention of mine to try and specify a particular sub-category of the essay which had the character of saying: 'what we're dealing with here is a work of the imagination'.

Paul Davies: So we're entering a genre here that is neither fictional nor documentary. But as you say, more like an essay or speculation on certain ideas…

John Hughes: Which doesn't make it other-than-documentary. It just means that the term 'documentary' has to be recognized as a word that encompasses a wide range of traditions. So you can look at a particular film and find the fine threads of a variety of traditions that make their way into it.

Paul Davies: Is it more appropriate therefore to think of all films as basically telling some kind of story, whether it's preconceived and acted out (the narrative drama) or whether it's captured and reassembled in different ways in the editing suite (the documentary). And in both cases what we're really hoping for is some kind of engagement with an audience in order to bring about change - or at best distraction…

John Hughes: I think a lot of my stuff has got an agit prop dimension. But there are other agendas too.

Paul Davies: So what prompted you to undertake a project like *What I Have Written* ? Was the narrative feature a step you'd always wanted to take?

John Hughes: Not really, it was simply getting hold of a manuscript of John Scott's novel as a work in progress and finding it very engaging and feeling that it was dealing with important material and then thinking that the only way to do this was as a narrative drama .

Jacek Koman as Jeremy Fliszer in *What I Have Written* (1996)

Paul Davies: And yet the style of the film (for want of a better word) the use of stills - gives it a kind of documentary feel. The frozen images in that film are like captured moments of reality. It also shares with your other work a kind of excitement about the image, a kind of playfulness with form and editing.

John Hughes: When the Philippine bishop, Cardinal Sin, was asked how, as a committed Christian, he could justify the relationship between his church and the dictator Ferdinand Marcos he said it was a kind of 'critical collaboration'. So I guess the 'playfulness' you talk about there in the films for me is a 'critical collaboration' with orthodox ways of speaking. And that comes up in films like *Traps* and *All That Is Solid* – both films are engaged in a critical collaboration with orthodoxy. And part of that is an exploration of the poetic dimension of image and story. In relation to *What I Have Written* you're right, the themes that are central to that narrative are exactly concerned with the telling of stories and their relationship to actuality. And the troublesome status of that relationship.

Paul Davies: It's also a film about a specific 'document'- a piece of writing that has a disputed authorship.

John Hughes: Yes. That's one of the things I responded to in the book that Scott was writing. They were parallel concerns to what I had been doing in all those previous films.

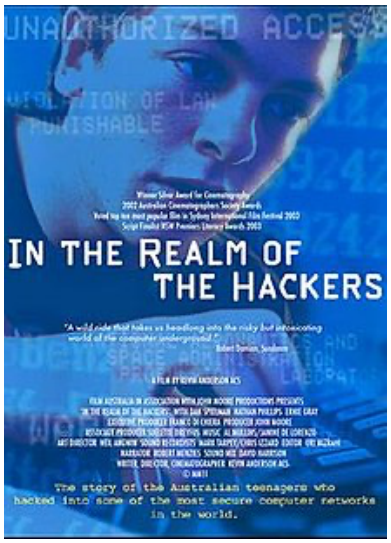
Paul Davies: So what role if any, is there for the dramatic reconstruction in the documentary? Does it depend on the project- is it a matter of what's appropriate or is it just part of the tool box of the film maker? Because I suppose it's also about resources…

John Hughes: Well there's dramatic reconstruction and there's dramatic reconstruction.

Paul Davies: For example, in *One Way Street* - it took the form of a kind of 'speculative reconstruction' perhaps? I'm thinking of the scenes there between Walter Benjamin and Asja Lakis - which are not even pretending to be real in a sense, but are a kind of 'embellished drama'.

Nick Lathouris as Walter Benjamin in *One Way Street* (1992)

John Hughes: We used to call it 'stylized reconstruction'. But the word 'reconstruction' becomes a bit redundant in that sense. And 'dramatic reconstruction' in documentary at this stage doesn't have a real lot of use for me. It's not the kind of, taken for granted form, that it once was - you know the 'dramatic documentary' – the drama which sought to tell a true story as accurately as it could using actors, dialogue, sets and costumes - that's much less common now. But the tradition lives on and you see it in works like *The Realm of the Hackers* (written and produced by Kevin Anderson, produced by John Moore) where what you have on the screen are illustrations of events the protagonists in the film describe.



In the Realm of the Hackers (2003)

There's a certain kind of realist naturalism that occurs in that tradition. At some point there was a strong critique among documentarists of that realist naturalism as a mode in documentary on the grounds that it made claims about its legitimacy which were very hard to sustain.

Paul Davies: So it became a suspect methodology?

John Hughes: Yes. And there are a couple of ways that criticism emerged- partly through people writing about it. And also through the development of strategies in certain films that directly attack it. And the way to directly attack it seemed to me to be to make those moments of illustration explicitly fictional and not seek to have them perform as realist naturalism. But have them perform as a kind of poetic moment. And once you decide on that strategy it's about finding the aesthetic means to achieve it.

Paul Davies: Which is the quality of those scenes in *One Way Street* that are quite deliberately unrealistic. Staged almost.

Paul Davies, John Hughes on the set of *One Way Street* (1992)

John Hughes: In that case and in other cases, the strategies used have readable significance which is not explained but have to be teased out of it by the spectator. They can either read it or not. But the poetic, fragmented images in *One Way Street* are much more set pieces. Whereas, I think of things like *50 Years Of Silence* that Carole Sklan wrote and Ned Lander directed, which sought to produce emotive and evocative historical moments in the life of the protagonist (events from the 1940s). In that film there were a series of highly

stylized poetic images that the writer designed that allow you to connect with the story in an emotional way without implicitly making the claim that this is what it was really like - or what really happened. So that becomes a convention and orthodoxy in itself.

Paul Davies: So the speculation about what happens needs to be transparent speculation?

John Hughes: It's not as though people who are watching realist drama don't know they're watching something that has been written and manufactured for that purpose.

Paul Davies: There's a suspension of disbelief though that goes on in narrative drama to the extent that a lot of the audience apparently think the actors make up the words themselves. (laughs)

John Hughes: In the documentary, of course they do. And in *Traps* so did the actors - I'm thinking of John Flaus's priest for example. But that was part of the playfulness of that film.

Ericka Addis, Paul Davies, James Grant
on location in Canberra for *Traps* (1985)

Paul Davies: So was Walter Benjamin a major influence on your work - Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, the fragmentary nature of existence

and creativity? Searching for the revelation…

John Hughes: Yes, I'm interested in Benjamin and I'm still discovering things. Working my way through. It's not so much the Artwork essay. It changes at different points. Trying to understand his work. I keep going back to it. One of the reasons it's so rich is because in some ways it's very complex and has so many layers.

Paul Davies: And lots of readings.

John Hughes: I think so. But part of the beauty of it is that you can use it- both the methods Benjamin employs to write and the material that he's dealing with, and the creative ideas that he develops. You can apply them critically.

Paul Davies: A recent project you were working on was *Australian Nations.*

John Hughes: Yes, I spent most of last year working with Rachel Perkins and a number of writers, basically doing research for a series of seven or eight one hours on an Aboriginal history of Australia. I'm now working on a project which is inspired by a recent book of Dennis Atlman's. And I'm interested in something on the Australian film industry. But that's at an early stage.

Paul Davies: And the title of your company – "Early Works"- Does that imply the best is yet to come?

John Hughes: Of course. (laughs)

(Interview at *Lo Spuntino* Cafe, Acland Street, St. Kilda 22/2/03)

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