

*Observations: Studies in New Zealand Documentary*

By Russell Campbell.

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Reviewed by Kirsten Moana Thompson

‘The documentary is reality observed; what marks it off from other forms of cinema is that it tells us more about the object of observation than about the observer.’<sup>1</sup> So Russell Campbell asserts in *Observations: Studies in New Zealand Documentary*. Campbell continues,

That is why *The Newest City on the Globe* (Peter Wells, 1985) scarcely qualifies. Napier bathed in coloured light, bedecked with balloons and streamers, peopled with stenographers in silhouette, is merely the canvas on which Peter Wells can elaborate his visual fantasies ... This is framing so *deliberate* as to violate one’s sense of documentary; there is no sense whatever that this image was caught by chance.<sup>2</sup>

This is what troubles Campbell’s foundational study - a persistent conviction that documentary must mean one thing, and that ‘history transfigured by yearning’ and the ‘documentary of desire’ created by Peter Wells and Stewart Main, amongst others, offer an epistemological and stylistic challenge to the observational or direct cinema documentary.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholars like Steve Anderson in *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past* (2011) and Alex Juhasz in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing* (2007) have proposed much more expansive definitions of documentary that include mixed docu-fictional modes, reality television, essay films, dramatic reenactments, video confessions, home movie remixes, personal Web pages, i-movies and even video games. For example, Anderson proposes that with *JFK Reloaded* (which controversially offered a cash prize to anyone who could match the timing and trajectory of Oswald’s violent crime), that the video game expanded ‘the purview of the documentary mode into such nonobjectivist forms as essayistic or performative representation.’<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Michael Renov and Alisa Lebow have pointed to the aesthetic and structural centrality of the first person observer in documentary.<sup>5</sup> In 1993 Renov argued that there are four fundamental tendencies in documentary, including expression along with analysis, persuasion, and recording and revealing.<sup>6</sup> City symphony films like *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) and *A Propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1929) exemplified this tradition, and many films hybridize these different tendencies as Joris Ivens did in *The Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929). Renov argued that all discursive forms, documentary included, are fictive in their engagement and deployment of rhetorical devices. From choices in camera angle, lenses and lighting to editing and staging, fiction and non-fiction filmmaking are inextricably mixed in their engagement with performativity and narrativity.<sup>7</sup>

First conceived and written over the course of 25 years as conference papers and occasional pieces for *Illusions* and art catalogues, Campbell’s book includes four new essays: Stropky Sheilas, The New Zealand Wars, Music on Film, and the Conclusion ‘Disputed Ground’. The documentary is a remarkably dominant form of filmmaking in New Zealand - Victoria University even shelves documentaries separately from all other films, as if their status is *sui generis*.<sup>8</sup> Campbell’s book is a close study of one particularly popular subgenre in the history of New Zealand documentary. Namely, the traditional observational, socially progressive documentary that became enormously popular in the postwar period with the work of Richard Leacock and the Maysles Bros. His goals in writing this book were not a comprehensive study of NZ documentary, which Campbell acknowledges is ‘richer and more adventurous than the

sample I have chosen to write about.’<sup>9</sup> Instead his focus, and indeed the content of many chapters was shaped by ‘the light they shed on developing notions of New Zealand national identity’, and as part of this goal he excluded documentaries ‘that deal with overseas issues and events, even if they involve New Zealanders’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed Campbell’s choices prompt key questions: why and how is documentary of such importance in New Zealand filmmaking? And if we still consider national identity as an important question in New Zealand film and media studies, how can we examine New Zealand’s cultural histories in isolation from the international forces that shaped them? For example, how might a discussion of second wave feminism or a consideration of indigenous media in the sixties and seventies have informed filmmaking practices and their theorization in the New Zealand context? That is, how can the local not be informed by a relationship to global forces? Further, how might Campbell’s focus on national identity in which ‘the touchstones of Kiwi identity are collective action, public provision of services, the democratic process and the welfare state [and] a caring and egalitarian society’ be informed by comparative studies which trace the ways that New Zealand film production shares features with the cinema of other small nations like Ireland, Iceland or Hong Kong?<sup>11</sup> What relationship does New Zealand documentary have to institutional funding sources and to specific screening outlets such as television? Campbell’s focus remains on content and aesthetics rather than a history of institutional policy or global context, although his readings of these films position their content and themes within a domestic context of assertive social activism, from feminism to Māori sovereignty, antiracism and trade union struggles of the last forty years.

The structure of Campbell’s book is tripartite. In part one, ‘Workers and Stirrers’, he focuses on socially progressive documentaries and film practitioners, with chapters on industrial conflict; feminism (‘Stroppy Sheilas’); Cecil Holmes’ work at the National Film Unit; and narrational strategies in *Patu! The Bridge and Bastion Point Day 507*. It is noted that documentaries from Barry Barclay’s *Tangata Whenua* (1974) to Chris Strewe’s *Waitangi* (1977) ‘collectively ... exposed a history of racial oppression that ran directly counter to the myth of harmonious race relations in New Zealand that had been promulgated up to that point.’<sup>12</sup>

Part two, ‘State of the Nation’, continues this focus on historical revisionism, from James Belich’s television series (and spin off from his book), *The New Zealand Wars*, to the competing documentaries *Someone Else’s Country* (Alister Barry, 1996), and *Revolution* (John Carlaw, 1996) that take very different positions on the radical social changes of the Labour government of the eighties. It also looks at changing populist and social histories like *Our People Our Century* (Ninox Films, 2000) and the more recent 13 part *Frontiers of Dreams* (Whakapapa/Top Shelf/NZ on Air, 2005). For Campbell, the social significance of Belich’s series lay in the fact that ‘for the first time in a popular medium, [it] promoted the idea that Maori signatories to the Treaty of Waitangi did not, in their mind, cede sovereignty, and that the wars therefore, were to be seen as a continued assertion of Maori independence.’<sup>13</sup>

Part Three focuses on ‘Kiwi Culture’ including documentaries on artists, musicians, poets and kiwiana. Here Campbell’s critical voice is most evident. He acerbically observes that the creative artist biography, is a ‘well established branch or genre of New Zealand documentary’, with ‘by and large prestige productions’, yet ‘display little interest in the history of their artforms’.<sup>14</sup> Instead they are ‘celebratory tributes, worthy, formulaic, occasionally a little dull’ or ‘affirmative’, and ‘because these are prominent New Zealanders, the quality of the work is assumed or asserted by fellow members of the cultural network.’<sup>15</sup> Discussing a series of

documentaries focused on Kiwi popular culture, such as *Kiwiana: Kiwi As !* (Shirley Horrocks, 1996) and *Dunnies Down Under* (Erik Derks, 2003), with Ginette McDonald, Campbell suggests that these documentaries tell us less about the purported iconic status of Buzzy Bees or gumboots, and more about the national character in their deadpan delivery. Campbell observes, 'it's as if the films have stumbled inadvertently on what has genuinely emerged as a marker of New Zealand identity ... the style of laidback comic performance associated with figurers like John Clarke, Ginette McDonald and the Topp Twins.'<sup>16</sup>

Campbell's final chapter looks to the future of NZ documentary, and his conclusion is worth quoting in full:

For the future I look to films that employ the energy and imagination [Hamish] Keith speaks of to describe our country accurately, pitilessly; that delight in beauty and achievement, but bear witness too to cruelty and injustice; that are intellectually adventurous, and do not feel compelled to pander to their audience; that employ laidback Kiwi humour when it strikes the right note, and not when its straining for effect; that rejects boosterism, punctures complacency, and do not close their eyes to disquieting truths.<sup>17</sup>

The historical and cultural role of documentary in New Zealand film production and aesthetic practice is clearly an important one; but why and how that has been the case has been insufficiently addressed in film and media studies in New Zealand.<sup>18</sup> This book offers an important start to that conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Campbell, *Observations: Studies in New Zealand Documentary* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> cit. D.L. LeMahieu, *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* by Allan Cameron; *Abandoned Images: Film and Film's End* by Stephen Barber, and 'Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past' by Steve F. Anderson, *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 43, 1 (2013): 30-34.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Renov, ed., *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Alisa Lebow, *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First-Person Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria University Library staff explained that the division of DVDs into documentaries and fiction films came about after relocating them to a public area for browsing. Academic staff from the School of English, Film, Theatre and Media requested an inhouse catalogue system rather than the Library of Congress system, so that fiction films with similar titles would not have identical or near identical LC numbers. However this still does not explain why the two groups of films remained separated by different catalogue systems, as both are used for teaching purposes. Personal Correspondence with Author and Victoria University Library Technology Services.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, vii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-144.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>18</sup> Exceptions include Deborah Shepard (2000), Clive Sowry (2011), and Geraldine Peters (2011) (see bibliography).