

Romancing the stone, from Cinderella to Waltzing Matilda: a documentary project exploring the Opal and Sapphire industries along the Tropic of Capricorn

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Abstract

Dai Vaughan has argued that every documentary is a do-it-yourself reality kit, a creative game which engages the *auteur* on a level of direct relevance with the world around us; a form of play in which the film maker juxtaposes the desire to rewrite history, and its impact on contemporary society, with the tensions created by extremes of landscape, of characterisation and of storytelling (1986, p. 175). The documentary makers of this work in progress have maintained that both the Queensland boulder opal found by a gold fossicker near Blackall in 1869 and the superb blue sapphire discovered by railway surveyors on the Western line in 1894 are very much a part of our cultural heritage in Capricornia. The nucleus of our film concerns the history and lifestyle of the people, the small independent miners, who over more than a century have fossicked for gemstones from Withersfield on the Central Highlands to Yaraka and Winton in the far west. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to define the relationship between the social construction of these heritage icons as a truly regional cultural identity with a visual interpretation in documentary film, produced in a creative and educational mode.

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Romancing the stone: a documentary project

Introduction

The heritage industry today is a new mode of cultural production which gives a new way of life to those regional places and spaces in danger of disappearing, because they are no longer functioning economically. In fact, cultural tourism has been called ‘a value added industry’ ensuring these places will survive by adding this value of pastness and difference (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998, p. 150). It is envisaged that our documentary project will examine the often-conflicting roles of culture, nostalgia, heritage together with marketing the gemfields’ tourism product, within these small mining communities. The viewer will be able to reflect on the

images and narratives of this extraordinary landscape as the film links important issues about historical representation, local and national mythology, heritage and tourism—to a real and contemporary environment today as these ‘symbols of the past’ are turned into tourist destinations, becoming significant symbols of the future (Huf 2006).

Certainly, video film is a unique kind of language. Jean Francois Lyotard has identified the television documentary as a series of ‘language games’ which experiment with narrative knowledge and with rhetoric, ‘the disturbing and the meliorating’ (1985, p. 7). The limits of these creative language games, he tells us, are the limits of our world. In researching the history of the opal and sapphire industry, the authors have discovered disturbing encounters with reality, with the past and present. The hardships encountered on the life journey of these small independent ‘petit bourgeois’ miners captures the imagination as the documentary reveals what motivates them in a harsh and remorseless environment. Through archival research and preliminary interviews, it has already been envisaged just what is possible to accomplish through the creativity of a documentary film, (through university studies and university resources), beyond the safety of what we already know of a realm of heritage which must be protected and preserved.

The Central Queensland Gemfields: its history and its people

On the Tropic of Capricorn, approximately 320 kilometres west of Rockhampton, and stretching from small towns Anakie, Sapphire, Rubyvale, Withersfield and The Willows, to Yaraka, Winton and Kynuna in far Western Queensland, is a vast and untamed landscape which has become renowned for its precious sapphires and opals. As noted above, the sparkling sapphire was discovered by surveyor Richardson, probably the first serious miner to settle in this area, while distant relative Paddy O’Reilly had earlier discovered opal on Listowel Downs at Blackall. In the early 1920s and 30s opal mines flourished at Jundah, Yowah, Eromanga, Opalton and Quilpie which were all linked by the Cobb & Co coach route, a route which became desert or mud flats depending on the season. Millions of years ago these opal fields from Yowah to Winton were part of a vast inland sea and home to terrestrial dinosaurs, whose fossils, ironically were first discovered in 1963 by an opal fossicker, adventuring into rugged desert country bordered by jump-ups, covered with Spinifex and bulldust, between Winton and Old Cork Station, today called Lark Quarry. These significant places are still frontier country, and the romantic story of the sapphire and opal-mining industry is an important part of this region’s cultural heritage.

According to fourth generation miner Peter Richardson (whose ancestors first discovered both sapphire and opal), the passion of his life, his ‘Australian Dream’, is to seek and find the unique boulder opal, ‘the most beautiful opal in the world’ (Richardson 2007, interview, 4 January). The documentary will follow Richardson’s quest for the boulder opal in the far west, and recover the stories of some extraordinary gemfield identities, including mining surveyor Harry May, who ‘jammed’ his D4 bulldozer on a ridge of opal rock in 1972, rescued and cut this magnificent stone, half of which remains in a Canadian museum to this day. Harry found his dream opal, but alas, never mined again (Richardson 2007, interview, 4 January). We will visit Paddy O’Reilly’s lost mine shafts near Mt Tighe and Paddy’s Lagoon on Ravensbourne Station, where Peter Richardson and his father travelled in 1960 to retrace the footsteps of their ancestor and the father of the Queensland boulder opal.

The documentary will explore the strange world of those pioneering sapphire miners and their families who settled at Anakie in the early 1920s, like Elizabeth and Edward Richardson (and later son John Henry and May Richardson), who left a comfortable home at Barcaldine, with horse and dray, to establish the first washing plant for the recovery of sapphires from alluvial dirt—when threepence a load was paid for the successful retrieval of precious gems. Many of these pioneering families settled in tents or shacks made of Hessian bags or flattened kerosene tins, living in extraordinary harsh conditions.

Aunt Willer and Uncle Tone from Blackall had built ... the modest shelter that was to be our temporary home. This was situated on Duffer's Hill about a mile distant due west from the shopping centre. On gaining entrance to this small structure, it seemed we 'the family' would have to hang like possums from the exposed rafters. I cannot remember how Mother fitted us in. Mabel Constance Nix (nee Richardson).

Captured Sunshine (1970)

From these very first years there were mining booms, depressions, recessions, years when fossickers dropped their tools and went to war; in World War One, the bottom fell out of the market as major overseas buyers from Germany and Russia became 'the enemy'. Following World War Two, small towns flourished with would-be small, independent miners. There was an important local market for opal and sapphire, but gradually technology made its mark on the industry as big mining syndicates moved in to these areas. Living conditions for the small miner became even harsher. Passionate opal fossickers drove their huge backhoes for hundreds of kilometres to seek out their opal mountains. As Jim McAllister and Dan Teghe noted in their study of the Central Queensland gemfield towns of Anakie and Sapphire, the fortunes of the small 'petit-bourgeois' mining community has drastically changed due to the overproduction and falling demand for sapphires in recent years. This overproduction, however, has also ironically driven most large 'hi-technology' mining syndicates out of the area according to McAllister and Teghe (2006, p. 166).

Heritage tourism and the gemfields tourist product: a brand new industry

Local entrepreneurs are turning to tourist enterprises which still have their basis in the sapphire deposits, but now repackage their 'cultural capital' accumulated by the long history of small scale mining, to sell it to tourists as an authentic small miner experience. (McAllister & Teghe 2006, p. 164)

Today, tourists descend a facsimile sapphire mine, wash ostensible sapphire-bearing gravel, find whatever sapphires have been seeded there and offer them to local gem-cutters who cut the stones in the sight of the tourists and set them to specification. Despite the fact that original resources may be over exploited, the local mining community is still building its sustainability 'due to the ties which the locals have with this way of life, with this local culture which is being packaged and sold as tourist products to visitors, thus sustaining a viable economic community base' (2006, pp. 164–65).

While unemployment *rose* rapidly at Anakie during the days of heavy machinery mining, it has now begun to *fall*. The numbers of people in this particular gemfield's community who work in tourism areas such as sales, accommodation

and catering has grown steadily since 1970s, in an industry with a strong input in the town's economy. There are guided tours, mining expeditions and mining equipment available to the visitors. Common property resources have been redefined to fuel a confident local tourism industry.

Both Peter Richardson, and McAllister and Teghe argue, however, that a successful tourism industry is interdependent with small scale mining because of the proven and accessible sapphire bearing alluvial deposits, located near gemfield towns. Natural resource assets are husbanded by community based information-wise businesses 'as they combine natural resources and community culture to sell the package as the tourism experience' (McAllister & Teghe 2006, p. 169). Any adult can obtain a Miner's Right which entitles them to commence mining for sapphires on available Crown land and also entitles them to obtain a mining tenement, use public resources such as timber, gravel and water and freely sell their sapphires to visiting buyers (Ryan 1974, cited in McAllister & Teghe 2006).

As Peter Richardson relates to the filmmaker, throughout the 1960s his family made a reasonable livelihood, diversifying from the down-stream processing of rough sapphires into gemstone faceting and jewellery making. At three years old, he was packing sapphires and at eight years old he was the youngest gemcutter in the field. His family believed they would someday strike it rich! (Richardson 2007, interview, 4 January). This was the passionate belief of the small miners, which was reflected in their tough lifestyle and their whole mining culture, and still relevant today.

However, it is still the hunt for the boulder opal, which is Peter's life mission after forty years exploring an even harsher landscape on the Thompson and outer Barcoo Rivers, in far western Queensland. 'The best in the world' says Peter, 'not the black opal of Lightning Ridge, nor the milky white opal of Cooperpedie, but the pale pink boulder opal of western Queensland.' He will tell of battles with the Mining Department or the EPA (Environment Protection Authority) about issues over land use, land ownership, over a shared land culture and the real 'meaning of place'. In good years, the West is green and abundant with wildlife, exotic flowers and birds; in drought, everything vanishes to the nearest waterhole for survival. After prospecting and mining for sapphires and opals, with the huge machines necessary for these operations, Peter Richardson and several colleagues maintain that a whole network of new waterholes is opened up which can create a stable water supply to sustain native wildlife. Wild horses and cattle all use these convenient water catchments. But this is a major issue with the EPA who considers them an environmental hazard and insists they are backfilled to original land condition, or miners will face severe penalties. According to Richardson, it has taken years to update the Exploration Permit for Mining by this government department.

There are many extraordinary stories to be told about eccentric colleagues and legendary prospectors Cecil Hunt and Les Ramsey or Gerry Docktor and his magnificent opal 'rose'. There is the intriguing history of May Bradfield, an excellent horsewoman and member of the Bradfield circus family who wanted to fly like Amy Johnson. She became a buyer of blue sapphires and from the stones she crushed herself was able to follow her dream of gaining her pilot's licence in 1931 and becoming the only woman to hold a commercial pilot's licence. Flying *The Golden Eagle*, she took part in the Melbourne Centenary Air Race, but tragically was killed together with two female passengers when her plane was incinerated following a collision at Kingsford Smith aerodrome (*Captured Sunshine*, Mabel Nix 1970, pp. 47, 48).

The documentary as ‘a slice of life’: its impact on contemporary regional society

The authors maintain that the role of the documentary maker in recording the social history of different cultural groups, and exposing the ambiguity and contradictions of real life situations within the context of our Australian society is a complex one. The empowerment of camera, script and voice, sometimes nostalgic, sometimes ideologically opposed, can be viewed on many different levels. On one level there is the personal journey capturing the tourism product on the vast and isolated gemfields, and documenting the producers of these mining industry locations. But on another level, a different landscape opens up with the problematic debate on cultural heritage, cultural tourism, on environment, on ownership of the mining leases and on ownership of the land itself. At the end of the journey, after visiting a wide variety of destinations the audience may decide that after all our regional landscape ‘is a tradition built upon a rich deposit of myths, memories and obsessions’ and is certainly a shared culture (Schama 1996, p. 18). With its traditional migrant and local populations, expanded over a century of mining, its original Aboriginal inhabitants, its frenetic European and contemporary Asian miners, the landscape of the Central Queensland gemfields is very much a shared culture.

Certainly, the heritage discourse prevalent within the miners’ community is vital to today’s contemporary forms of cultural tourism and draws on nostalgia as a valid mode of remembering and accessing a longing for the past. Lowenthal maintains that nostalgia is a natural ally for tourism as both offer a means of escape, one to another time, the other to another place. Nostalgia works as a connection to our heritage, to national and regional events, to public figures and people far beyond our personal experiences (Lowenthal cited in Trotter 1999, p. 20). It reinforces national identity when confidence is weakened or threatened, says Hewison (1987, p. 118).

It can be argued that the documentary director has the dual role of directing the camera and telling the real story of this community, the adventurers who inhabit the isolated opal and sapphire mines. Much of the narrative and rhetorical construction of the story will be completed prior to editing, as these images are shot and questions asked which determine the character of the final production. But the interviews with local respondents will play an enormous role in projecting their identity and their historical environment onto the film. Together with the voice of the narrator, this creates a challenge in fusing the rhetoric with these alternate voices for a sense of unity as interviews with living identities are interspersed with archival film and actuality shots, as Silverstone argues, all conveying a specific message within the different layers of text inscribed in the narrative, vision and sound tracts—the ‘look’ and the ‘ideology’ (Silverstone 1986, pp. 81–82).

If heritage tourism, and the ‘petit-bourgeois’ mining industry have become collaborative industries converting locations into viable exhibitions of themselves, then the camera must capture this sense of place in terms of cultural and historical determinations, within the parameters of the documentary. Darian-Smith has argued that the social production of memory is a collective production in which everyone participates. Memories of events and places will link us to other Australians enabling us all to ‘inhabit our own country’ (Darian-Smith 1996, pp. 1-3). Dai Vaughan suggests that finally the documentary takes on the form of ‘a slice of life’ being about something everyday, but still remarkable, as the film director decides how to capture this sense of community, identity, nostalgia and

Australianness on camera, and how to integrate and interpret these images and significant sites with a broad but meaningful cultural context. Both mythology and the collective memory are involved as history links with the past are co modified, and presented to the tourist, at every destination on the Tropic of Capricorn including those unique precious stone mining sites throughout the Central Highlands and Western Queensland.

Once the frontier was literacy ... the next frontier is democratic representation on the screen.

Michael Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary* (1998, p. 369)

The University as centre of a creative film community

Michael Rabiger, academic, acting chair of the film/video department at Columbia College, Chicago, visiting professor at New York University, and respected film maker, argues that the documentary is increasingly becoming a medium for the individual, committed voice, as great numbers of media students have chosen to study documentary film, as the work that matters to them most in the entire world, 'be it political, historical, humanitarian or celebratory' (1998, p. 369). The crew may be getting smaller, the approach more intimate accommodating a balance of structured preparation and existential spontaneity, but the teamwork, academic research, narrative writing techniques, and application of film and video technical skills are still essential. A documentary, says Rabiger is the sum of relationships during a period of shared action and living, 'a composition made from the sparks generated during a meeting of hearts and minds' (1998, p. 369).

Rabiger maintains that documentary makers have an ardent respect for the integrity of the actual, for the primacy of the truth in the lives of real people, both great and small. Therefore, the documentary maker's mission is not to change or evade destiny but rather to embrace its substance, to speak passionately of the lessons of history and the choices available for making a more humane and generous society (1998, p. 33). If the student is interested in people, social movements and politics, 'if making one's individual voice heard is worth investing a long, uphill and impecunious struggle, then he or she may really adapt to the documentary film maker's way of life' (1998, p. 367). Experimentation is opening up, because technological advances are putting new tools in ordinary people's hands.

Therefore, Rabiger suggests that within the university environment, a good film or documentary-making class will offer a broad balance of technical education with a strong foundation in conceptual, aesthetic and historical course work. There needs to be a creative environment in which students can safely play, experiment and make mistakes; there will be defined tracks for specialising in screenwriting, camera, sound editing, directing and producing. The school film making community can taper off into the young professional community to mutual advantage, as successful former students may give visiting lectures, or come back as teachers. Like contemporary classes in animation, documentary can be taught as a specialty. If documentary making is to be a part of university education, with professional equipment such as digital cameras and editing equipment generously supplied, the class will become the centre of an enthusiastic film producing community, where students support and crew for each other as a matter of course. University and industry mentors will not only give advice and help to steer projects, but will exemplify the way of life the student is trying to make his or her own. Only by going through all the stages of making a film or documentary—no

matter how badly—can the aspiring director see the faults or the strengths in his or her own work.

Documentaries are after all a construct. They reveal as much about their makers as they do about their ostensible subject. Like it or not, it is our own assumptions that we put on the screen, so making films intelligently means examining and evolving who we are and what we believe (1998, p. 320). The playful treatment of the video script can become an important political tool in examining issues of public culture and heritage, as present day reality is juxtaposed with legend and myth and viewers are invited to make judgements about the historic truth surrounding the iconic characters of our region.

What storyline the documentary takes and what archetypal images and sounds the documentary editing team select from life in order to link them with movement, with changes of pace, colour, texture, wide-angled camera zooms and close-ups, super-imposes, fade-ins and dissolves, will create a drama and a theatre of real life. These film devices can play creatively with Dai Vaughan's *slice of life, do it yourself reality kit*, to develop and inform the dialogue, the metaphor, the whole look and style of the documentary. This *play* may be transparent, or it may be disguised. It is only by playing with the context, experimenting with archival footage and stills, trying different lenses, developing a collage of poetic images, or importing a post contemporary sound track, that the auteur and director can finally present the documentary viewer with a film with true relevance to an isolated and often forgotten destination. *The romance of the pale pink opal and the blue green sapphire will certainly turn Cinderella into Waltzing Matilda for all the world to see.*

In conclusion, the authors emphasise that documentary making is a growing field in which the levels of inventiveness, humour, courage and humanism are all expanding. As documentary's founding father John Grierson said 'it is the creative treatment of actuality' (cited in Rabiger 1998, p. 3); and as noted in the introduction, documentary is a form of creativity that engages the filmmaker with the world around us—with our contemporary society—and in this project, with our opal and sapphire mining community of the Central Highlands. The documentary concerns social and political issues; it may also develop into a project unearthing important elements of regional history and national heritage which can be seen as unique ingredients of today's cultural tourism package, as described within this paper. A new historical gaze is taking in areas of human activity often ignored by society, including the family, the workplace, ordinary people and the isolated small mining communities, described here (Trotter 1998; Huf 2006), but so often invisible to past historians. As regional centres seek their own authentic spirit of place and space, the authors have maintained that the creative recording on film of the gemfields' oral histories, past and present, can open up new areas of imagining and inquiry.

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