

DOCUMENTARY: HOW THE MYTH WAS RECONSTRUCTED

by Brian Winston

George Stoney's *How The Myth Was Made* (1979) points up some of the differences between the old and new documentaries. The film was motivated, Stoney relates, by his observation, while teaching at NYU, "that most of my students -- all children of the sixties and cinéma vérité -- are so dominated by that genre of filmmaking that they find it hard to open their minds to any other approach." As a result, "they miss the power and the poetry of the earlier films while they fret about the veracity of details."

Jerry Youdelman (1982)

During the past half-century, George Stoney has made over 50 documentaries, none of which achieved canonical status. *All My Babies* (1952), a sponsored training film for African-American midwives, which most unusually won a general prize at an early Edinburgh Film Festival, comes closest; but between it and the prize-winning video *The Uprising of '34* in 1995 there are few titles either in circulation or cited in the literature. Only *The Weavers: Wasn't that a Time* (1984), a collective portrait of the engagé folk group which has become a PBS perennial, and *How The Myth Was Made*, a study of the 1934 Flaherty classic *Man of Aran*, are exceptions.

Yet Stoney's importance to the development of documentary in North America cannot be denied and rests on far more than these titles. As a productive filmmaker, as a teacher and, above all, as executive producer of the *Challenge for Change/Pour un société nouvelle* programme at the National Film Board of Canada between 1968 and 1970 and as the founder of the Alternate Media Centre at NYU in 1971, Stoney has played a major

agenda setting role in all North American debates about documentary, its forms, its ethics and its social function. Now that the four decade dominance of *cinéma vérité* (which is better described in this context as ‘direct cinema’) falters, it becomes ever clearer that Stoney’s preoccupations and concerns raise questions more difficult and more durable than those which fuelled the creation of that new approach to documentary in the 1960s. In his long, fertile career, Stoney has offered no more significant a statement for his alternative vision of the nature of documentary than *How The Myth Was Made*. Whatever his reasons for making it, this film has emerged as a key text for the whole Stoney documentary agenda.

In 1976, with his ex-student Jim Brown as co-director, Stoney returned to the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland to make a documentary about Robert Flaherty’s feature film *Man of Aran* which had been shot there four decades earlier. Stoney knew the island well not least because, in a curious coincidence, his ancestors had emigrated from there to the United States. Flaherty’s film created a picture of grinding, if picturesque, poverty on a rocky Atlantic outcrop where even the fields had to be laboriously hand made out of sea-weed and thin soil and fishing was a desperate, dangerous business. Although produced by Michael Balcon, a major figure in the British feature film industry, this film was nevertheless not a fiction. It was entirely shot and (as was Flaherty’s wont) processed on location. It involved no actors but used islanders. It contained no drama other than that arising from the people’s struggle to survive in a harsh environment. As in *Nanook of the North* (1921), Flaherty applied his pioneering insight that entertainment narrative norms could be met by crafting a story out of footage of the everyday. In short, *Man of Aran* was a documentary. It existed exactly in “the gap between life as lived and life as narrativized” identified by Bill Nichols as documentary’s central space (Nichols 1986: 114).

However, even at the time, question marks were raised over the status of the film. For

example, the central family were no such thing but Maggie Durrane (mother), Coleman 'Tiger' King (father) and 'Michaleen' Dillane (son) were cast to play these roles. As John Taylor, an assistant on the film, recalled for Stoney in *How The Myth Was Made*, the term 'mockumentary' rather than 'documentary' was being bandied about in connection *Man of Aran* even as the crew returned to London.

By the mid-1970s, such criticisms had long since crescendoed not just about Man of Aran but the whole classic documentary tradition of which it is part. It was not only the misrepresentations but the very basics of such documentary filming which had become suspect. Direct cinema had swept aside all stagings, all casting, all reconstructions of prior witnessed events, all interviews, all commentary and even all minimal interventions calling for actions to be repeated and the like. Instead a strict observationalism (in the form of long hand-held, available light and actual sync shooting) and an ethic of non-intervention of any kind promised a new level of realist representation. Direct cinema not only claimed to offer evidence of the world at heightened levels of objectivity and veracity but it also stridently denied that any other documentary form could do the same.

The tradition Flaherty had founded and in which Stoney had then been working for more than 20 years was declared to be fatally flawed. The films they and others had made were, in their essence, mendacious and bogus; any claim they made to be documentary was simply a fraud on the audience. *How The Myth Was Made*, created nearly two decades after direct cinema (and this assault) began, was Stoney's considered response. It is typical that he should couch his rationale for making the film in terms of the positive need of a teacher to enlarge his students' understanding and experience rather than a rebuttal of direct cinema's assumptions and attitudes. Regretting the missed "poetry and power" of the older films, in a note he wrote on the night before the final mix of *How The Myth Was Made*, he "hoped a film that that went to the heart of this matter might help" (Stoney, (1978 {a}:1).

This is not to say that Stoney was unaware of the difficulties that the tradition had got itself into prior to the coming of direct cinema. For example, he himself was ever willing to acknowledge that American documentary had lost its way in the thickets of sponsorship, which was, in the years after World War II, especially outside of New York City, virtually the only source of funding for documentary:

Every dollar that goes into the film is like a link in a chain that goes round your neck. It's that kind of dirty business finally (*interview with Rosenthal 1972: 228*).

Anyone looking at a representative sampling of American documentaries produced in the late 1940s and early 1950s would be forced to conclude that few of us who made them were either socially bold or artistically innovative (Stoney 1978 {b}: 15).

He was also well aware of the constraints of sync filming with feature film equipment and the need to escape from these difficulties with new lightweight equipment. This had been a major factor in the drive for the technical developments which produced the direct cinema style. He therefore had no quarrel as to the importance of the latest 16mm filmmaking technology but he remained clear-eyed about wilder claims, knowing the new technique offered no automatic earnest of truth but could be easily manipulated so that “the attitudes of omniscience and control are more apparent than ever....”

[Direct cinema pioneers] wanted to be “like flies on the wall” who merely observed and recorded what would have happened anyway, although critics soon pointed out how carefully they controlled what happened once they got into the editing room (Stoney 1978 {b}: 16,17).

Stoney was not alone in questioning direct cinema's dominance and truth-telling pretensions. As Noel Carroll pointed out, 'Direct cinema opened a can of worms and then got eaten by them' (Carroll 1983: 6). The rhetorical claim being made on the real was far too strong. The issues of mediation were not removed by the new style. Shots were still framed. Films were still edited. Stories were still created. Nevertheless, by the late 1970s, Stoney's desire to gainsay direct cinema and re-establish the validity of older documentary forms was a far from easy task. For all the critical caveats, direct cinema had triumphed in convincing the audience that it was the only true way. The style gave "the aura of truth to whatever was photographed, and, if the camera shook and went out of focus, it was even more convincing" (Stoney 1978{b}: 17).

Stoney, in choosing *Man of Aran* as the traditional documentary upon which to build his rebuttal, was not making life any easier for himself since that film lies at the very edge of acceptable practice even in traditional terms. However, the film is important to Stoney's position exactly because, in his view, Flaherty's manipulations and mediations contained a poetic "truth" about the Arans which would not necessarily have revealed itself to any passing camera-toting fly alighting on a wall. To defend the value of Man of Aran is to defend the entire archive.

It was therefore a sound forensic ploy for Stoney to expand as far as he was able the inauthenticity charge sheet laid against Flaherty. He needed for the film's "documentary value" (as Grierson once termed it) to be acknowledged despite the manipulations. However, these were still news even to the best informed of critics. His film was received at the time of its release more as exposé of malpractice than justification of poetic manipulation:

What a shock to discover [in *How the Myth Was Made*] that shark hunting had been gone for fifty years when Flaherty arrived; that the harpoon wounding the shark actually hit some

peat placed there for shooting; that the documentary “family” consisted of three entirely unrelated people; that telephoto lens sharply narrowing the distance between fore- and back-ground, made huge waves tower directly over the fishing boat; that such boats were no longer in use, but had in fact been much larger in the past; and that a famous pan shot, used by Flaherty to reveal the primitive terrain, stopped just before the camera would have shown (as it does in Stoney’s reproduction and completion of the shot), the fields of a rich landowner -- a man (and class) not even hinted at by Flaherty, a type of farming and terrain absent from his film (Vogel 1979: 75)

Nevertheless, the point remains, apart from illustrating his own ruthless honesty, that Stoney’s argument for the poetic potency of the film and its importance as a document of the otherwise unfilmable *mentalité* of the people of Aran simply does not turn on these factors and, therefore, the validity of the documentary tradition outside of direct cinema stands:

I blush to think of all the agitprop dramas I “re-enacted” myself back in the late Forties and Fifties. Then, most of us were filming real people and situations and basing our plots on real events; but our “messages” (and there was always a message) were being determined by our sponsors. We were working in a tradition of documentary set by John Grierson’s English and Canadian units which few of us questioned at the time. Today, most of those documentaries are considered stylistically archaic. *Yet on second viewing, one often finds in them precise observations and flashes of insight....* (Stoney 1983/4:10 emphasis added).

It is exactly the precise observation, the insights which Stoney wishes to celebrate in *Man of Aran*. It is these which justify Flaherty's techniques and excuse his mediation. One can find similar instances in Stoney's own films from the pre-direct cinema era. There is, for example, a wonderful moment in *All My Babies*. Despite the white male crew, the intrusive mass of 35mm equipment and the occasional lurking presence of the KKK outside the Georgia location wondering what the filmmakers were up to, in one shot the midwife, Mary Cooley, extends her hand to touch the cheek of Martha Sapp, the young woman who has just given birth, in an unfeigned and deeply moving spontaneous gesture of affection and care (Jackson 1982). This is surely an example that "intelligence and sensibility" which Jean-Luc Godard held to be fundamental qualities of the camera -- qualities which he felt that the direct cinema camera, "deprived of consciousness" and "despite its honesty", lacked (Godard 1963: 140).

Stoney's general point on this has to be well taken, even if the particular case of *Man of Aran* is hard to sustain. I have always thought that *Aran* was particularly ill served by Flaherty and there were real ethical issues to be faced which Stoney does not tackle in *How The Myth Was Made* -- for instance, the final sequence with the mountainous waves. Stoney allows Harry Watt, who worked on *Man of Aran* as an assistant, to claim that the islanders were safe and the waves were merely enlarged by use of a long lens. This is palpably not so; the seas were treacherous, long lens notwithstanding. Tiger's desperate grab at Maggie's hair to save her from falling into the waves gives the lie to Watt's disingenuous explanation. Flaherty himself knew full-well the thinness of the ethical ice upon which he was skating: "I should have been shot for what I asked these superb people to do for the film, the enormous risks I exposed them to, and all for the sake of a keg of porter and £5 a piece" (Rotha 1983: 113) Indeed he should have been, in my view.

It is not true overall, though, that Stoney avoids ethical issues. On the contrary, direct cinema's blindness about the morality of filmmaking is for him a major bone of contention. In the long run, Stoney's agenda on the ethics of the documentary is turning out to be more important than the somewhat simple-minded assertions of authenticity and the truth-claims being made at the time of *How The Myth Was Made*.

When comparing Stoney's stated intention with the note he wrote on the eve of the final dub, one can see that the film gained an ethical dimension during production which does directly address a major problem quite distinct from the issue of misleading the audience, the avoidance of which was the sum of direct cinema's ethical *raison d'être*:

Writing these notes on the evening before our final mix, I realize that ...MYTH... does what I had intended [i.e. asserts the poetic power of the old documentary style], but this is now almost incidental to a more important matter it wrestles with, one which affects all filmmaking done outside a studio that involves non-actors either representing themselves or playing roles that interpret the life they know and the place where they will continue to live.

...MYTH... illustrates what I believe to be a common truth: the filmmaker always leaves his mark on the places and people he films (Stoney 1978 {a}).

Man of Aran potently raises the issue of the morality of the filmmakers' relationship to the subjects they involve in their productions. As Stoney documents, many lives were touched by the Flaherty film in ways still obvious to Stoney nearly half-a-century after the original crew left the islands. Businesses were started with the money (a rare commodity on the Aran Islands in the early 1930s) earned working on the production. Lives changed, a few for the worse, many for the better as new careers were found,

sometimes in Dublin and sometimes in London. For Stoney, the film's existence has ensured that the islands are still populated and have a crucial tourist industry -- unlike the nearby Blasketts which are now deserted. This outcome justifies the shame some islanders feel in having their home forever stand for the worse sort of grinding rural poverty.

But the moral dilemmas of working with "real" people (that is non-professional "actors") is one which has led Stoney continually to seek a better power balance between himself and those he films and, on occasion, to take the extremely radical step of forfeiting his position a documentary director altogether. Compare Stoney's oft-repeated vision that he has spent much of his life making films on behalf of people who, in his view, should be making them themselves with the normal artistic assertion of the documentarist. As Fred Wiseman put this: "I couldn't make a film which gave somebody else the right to control the final print" (Rosenthal 1971: 71). Wiseman insists on his copyrighted prerogatives. Even an individual frame from one of his films cannot be reproduced for scholarly purposes without his permission (Benson & Anderson 1989: xi, 113-4.) For all direct cinema's novel approach, it still shared with the old tradition a view of the documentarist as artist and made no attempt to renegotiate the amoral artistic perquisites Flaherty had bequeathed them.

Stoney was clearly working on a different agenda; indeed on a different planet. His sensitivities to ethical problems in the filmmaker/subject relationship had led him to take a job as an executive producer of an experimental project at the Canadian National Film Board in 1968. *Challenge for Change/Pour un société nouvelle* explored the responsibilities of the documentarist more thoroughly than had ever been previously attempted. Interviewed at the time Stoney said: "Filmmakers are used to playing God.... Now we are saying to them, 'Let the people tell you what *they* want to film. Listen to them. The film is going to be *their* film'" (Watson 1970: 14).

The timely arrival of the Sony Portapak, the first user-friendly cheap video cameras and tape decks, allowed this agenda to be pushed to the limit. The coming of video permitted Stoney to reveal what he thought about film and all its works:

I'd always hated the chores of filmmaking, the lab runs, the months of sound transferring and synchronizing and transcribing even before one could get down to editing. Just the cumbersomeness and lack of immediate response that went with putting things through the lab often robbed one of a complete experience of collaboration with people in front of the camera which, for me, is the great joy of documentary and is what makes it a kind of filmmaking that demands a discipline of veracity almost unknown and perhaps inappropriate to other forms of filmmaking (Stoney 1983/4: 10)

With video, as the *Challenge for Change* programme aptly demonstrated, the filmmaker was able to move from the position of advocate to that of trainer and guide. The radicalism of this transition from documentary direction (however non-interventionist) to collaboration was most apparent in the cutting room. As Patrick Watson, one of Canada's most important broadcasters, noted: "Ceding authority over the edit is revolutionary; it requires a curious submission of the director's ego" (Watson 1970: 19). This was a revolution too far for direct cinema where directors were (and are) still "great artists" in the Flaherty mold, despite their disdain for Flaherty-style documentaries.

When Stoney returned to the US in 1970, he took the next logical step of seeking a democratized distribution system to match video's de-professionalized, collaborative community-based production. He thought he found it in cable television. Although now

increasingly corporate-owned, the burgeoning world of cable was hungry for material. Stoney's push for access channels (and his founding of the Alternate Media Centre at NYU to train the personnel needed to explore cable's public service potential) was arguably yet another revolutionary agenda item unknown to direct cinema.

A decade after the Canadian experiment, Stoney's concern for the process of collaboration and sensitivity to a film's (or tape's) subsequent social consequences became a central focus of *How the Myth was Made*. For Stoney, the effects of filmmaking on the people involved (and their heirs) was in the final analysis more important than either Flaherty's poeticism or his mendacities.

Anyway, rows about the authenticity of the image are essentially arguments about audience effects and the perceived need to ensure that what is shown on the documentary screen is a representation of some pre-existing reality -- a species of "contract with the viewer". Such disputes do not speak, except indirectly, to the morality (or otherwise) of filmmakers' dealings with participants. But the promise to the audience is exactly what the dominant direct cinema rhetoric insists on. It places the need for implicit audience belief in the non-mediated veracity of what is shown on the screen above any other consideration. In this it is complicit with the hegemonic thrust of mainstream screen media which also seeks to establish, in its news and public affairs coverage at least, an ideologically-suspect vision of "trustworthiness". Moreover, by insisting on the unbiased evidential nature of its techniques and by stressing the freedom this supposedly gives an audience to make up its own mind, direct cinema thereby downplays the limitations of its observational techniques and its moral deficiencies as regards the subject, two of the issues central to *How The Myth Was Made* and Stoney's overall position.

Yet this is not to say that Stoney is unconcerned about audiences. On the contrary; but, just as he rejected direct cinema's simple vision of unmediated truth, so too he queried

the assertion that the new style automatically transformed the audience into jurors able to determine what had transpired in reality from the evidence presented to them on the screen. Stoney's point of view on the documentarist's relationship with an audience seems to be that if mediation truthfully illuminates the issue at hand, then the interventions necessary to get the image are justified by this enlightenment. The "contract with the viewer" is to provide understanding not to promise to avoid manipulation.

Working with the Farm Settlement Administration in the years before America entered the war (1940-42), Stoney had used the Pare Lorentz New Deal documentary classics with small-group targeted rural audiences. This gave him a vision of the documentarist/audience relationship which owed far more to the norms of political activism than anything else.

John Grierson, the documentary producer theorist who established the National Film Board of Canada in 1939, recognised that the central problem for directors of social change films was not making the film but getting it to its intended audience....

My hunch is that American social documentarians need to build direct links with audiences like those links that made the few productions of the early Film and Photo League so immediate and effective. When people come together with the intent of seeing a film about some subject and know there will be time to discuss it afterward, the filmmaker has a fighting chance to make his point (Stoney {b} 1978: 16, 17).

Stoney disputes the critical view (held by the present writer among others) that the small marginalized audience documentary had always commanded was a measure of failure.

For him, as for Grierson, “when people come together” what they lack in numbers can be compensated for by their increased attention and involvement and their readiness to use what they have seen as a basis for social action. Not for Stoney, then, the platitudes of direct cinema’s oft repeated but nevertheless essentially pious belief that their works were merely evidence about which the audience could come to judgement in a quasi-judicial sense.

Although *How the Myth was Made* was produced for a general audience as well as the students whose ignorance had provoked him into making it, its most telling reception took place exactly in the circumstances Stoney regards as ideal -- a small, highly selected and highly motivated audience with time allowed for debate and the possibility of further action. In Australia, *How the Myth was Made* was premiered at the International Ethnographic Film Conference held in Canberra in 1978. This had been arranged by the American ethnographers David and Judy MacDougall who were then working in Australia. The meeting was dominated a group of filmmakers of which they were part, all graduates of UCLA, who had imported the techniques of direct cinema into ethnographic film making.

The sessions did not go well, perhaps because the tribal subjects of the films were present:

The previous evening’s conference event had turned into a tumultuous debate, touched off by a screening of Flaherty’s 1934 film *Man of Aran*, followed by George Stoney’s just-completed documentary exploration *Robert Flaherty’s “Man of Aran”*: *How The Myth Was Made*. Stoney’s film, while appreciative of Flaherty’s genius for poetic imagery, had popped the lid off all the distortions and omissions in Flaherty’s highly romanticized depiction of life on the Aran

Islands off Ireland.... Such revelations as these had made their points with the conference audience (James Roy MacBean 1983: 214).

Some tribal viewers decided, by no means incorrectly, that Stoney's defence of the old tradition harshly illuminated the exploitation they had suffered at the hands of documentarists of all persuasions. For them, Stoney had demonstrated not so much that the old tradition was viable but rather that both it and the newer forms were all extremely suspect. If, as Jean Rouch once put it, "anthropology was the eldest daughter of colonialism", then the ethnographic documentary, irrespective of its style, was revealed as a bastard grandchild (Eaton 1979: 33). The result was that the Aboriginal people present not only "voiced their demands loud and clear" but also "obtained from the Institute of Aboriginal Studies a strengthened commitment to proceed faster in providing Aboriginal people access to equipment and filmmaking instruction". The use of film as a basis for mounting evidence in their legal struggles over land-title and as a way of preserving tribal memory was bolstered. Out of the Canberra meeting, came, for example, *Two Laws* (1981), a film made by ethnographers Caroline Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini entirely under the direction of the Borroloola community. In fact, it repeats in essence the earliest phase of the *Challenge for Change* project. *Two Laws* starts with the filmmakers being introduced on camera: "I think you know these two, Alessandro and Caroline; they're going to help us make a film, and its our film so let's make a good film" (MacBean 1983: 222). It is.

And so is *How The Myth Was Made*. Stoney offers an implicit critique of direct cinema and a concomitant celebration of pre-direct cinema documentary forms as well as a rare and serious consideration of the morality of documentary film making especially as regards the way the process impacts on those who participate in filmmaking as subjects.

This is not to say, though, *How The Myth Was Made* is entirely successful vindication of Flaherty as the film's initial critical reception in the US and the Canberra conference indicate. The extensiveness of *Man of Aran*'s manipulations, which Stoney understood from his own early experience to be not that untoward, was a revelation to the general viewer. Stoney's overall purpose as defender of traditional documentary was, in effect, undercut by his choice of *Man of Aran* and his own ruthless honesty. Paradoxically, though, *How The Myth Was Made* is itself a quite traditional documentary and it saves the day in that it exactly illustrates Stoney's point about the viability of older styles. Audiences might still be unconvinced by *Man of Aran* (as deconstructed by Stoney) but they take *How The Myth Was Made* as objective evidence of Flaherty's procedures, the effects of the film on the community and the realities of contemporary Aran life in the late 1970s. And they do so despite commentary, match cuts, arranged sequences, and Stoney's own presence on camera as well as their own post-direct cinema understanding of what documentary should be. Despite its occasional sentimentality, perhaps the overall effectiveness of *How The Myth Was Made* is nothing but a tribute to Stoney's astonishingly open-minded, and indeed brave, attempt to examine an approach to filmmaking which he had used without question for decades.

In the years that have passed since *How The Myth Was Made* was itself made, the moral issue raised by the inevitability of a filmmaker leaving a mark on what is filmed has become ever more important. The easy accessibility of the camcorder, its intrusive sensitivity and portability have ensured that Stoney's concerns about the effects of film making on subjects remain central. Stoney's vision of a new relationship with the documentary subject based on an enhanced need for sensitivity, a veritable "duty of care" is as relevant as ever -- more pressing than direct cinema's "contract with the viewer". This is not to say also that the film's reception, albeit in certain limited circumstances, speaks to the viability of the old belief, which Stoney has never abandoned, that the

documentary is primarily a tool for social action by audiences.

Most importantly in both its form and content, *How the Myth Was Made* does make the case for all those other documentary forms which had been in abeyance throughout the first phases of direct cinema. In retrospect, Stoney's film symbolises a critical point in the direct cinema revolution. In fact, it represents a thermidor, that is the moment when the revolutionary pendulum reaches the limits of its arc and begins to return to a position of normalcy. It has still a long way to go but filmmakers are once again freely exploring a full range of documentary forms (whenever and wherever they can find the money); and, for all that audiences and critics are still in thrall to direct cinema's rhetoric and believe that only "the fly-o-the-wall" can capture reality, in the obscurer corners of the academy the worms in direct cinema's can are munching away. Eventually they will eat through to public consciousness.

As for Stoney, he is still in the business of making social documentaries and bringing people together to see them. He is still looking to film and tape to establish public agendas, to give voice and dignity to those who are unheard, to right wrongs and preserve memory; and he still hasn't ever pretended to be a fly on the wall. Not for a moment.

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