

Institution: University of Kent
Unit of Assessment: 35, Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
Title of case study:
Cultural Influence: Documentary Film from theory to practice
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Elizabeth Cowie's scholarship centres on the intersections of art, politics and the cinema. The impact of her research lies in the challenges she makes to existing paradigms, challenges that resonate within and beyond the academy. Widely taught in Higher Education (HE) across Europe, North America, and Australia, her research on documentary is also particularly significant for its influence on artist filmmakers. Insights gained from her arguments on aesthetics, spectatorship, and political engagement have been taken up by artists whose own work seeks to explore complex ideas about art, politics, trauma and memory.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Central to Cowie's substantial body of research is her investigation of the duality at the heart of documentary film: its status as both entertaining spectacle and source of knowledge. Her monograph <i>Recording Reality, Desiring the Real</i> (2011) is a summation of her engagement with documentary filmmaking through theoretical writing and dialogue with filmmakers undertaken over 15 years at Kent [1]. The early stages of Cowie's research were supported by an AHRB Research Leave award.</p> <p>Addressing the documentary form's history and its contemporary status, Cowie demonstrates the many ways in which filmmakers acknowledge past and current realities understood not only in narrowly factual terms, but as the objects of artistic representation, storytelling, and political debate. Her work explores and develops three issues in particular.</p> <p>(a) <i>The multiplicity of ways in which documentary is understood as a factual account of the world.</i> Cowie's research demonstrates that recorded images and sounds are never simply 'knowable.' Documentary is often referred to as non-fiction, but the act of representing events – through camerawork, editing, voice-over and other aspects of film technique – interprets and shapes our understanding of those events, even as it identifies facts about the world. Consequently anxiety may arise about how real, how truthful, documentary can be, leading to a desire for the real that is always failed by the representation [1, 4, 5].</p> <p>(b) <i>The psychological relationship of the spectator - and filmmaker - to recorded sounds and images.</i> The spectacle of recorded actuality was a key attraction of early silent films, and Cowie's research shows that this continues to be central to cinematic pleasure. Documentary film engages the spectator in the everyday <i>and</i> the extraordinary, producing a desire to know, a curiosity about the world. As the spectator is addressed by documentary characters, the spectator learns about them and with them, empathizing and identifying with them. Cowie produces new insights into how investigative documentaries as well as 'reality tv' shows engage viewers emotionally [1, 2, 4].</p> <p>(c) <i>Actuality as art.</i> John Grierson argued that documentary is the 'creative treatment of actuality,' an aesthetic project in which showing and talking about reality engage us in a process of 'coming to know' about it. Cowie complicates this perspective on documentary film. She argues that film's ability to elide times and spaces transforms the documentary event into an 'uncanny' experience – something at once familiar and strange, knowable and yet elusive. 'Coming to know' thus does not only involve a simple comprehension of what is shown and heard, but a recognition of what is unseen and unheard as well. Cowie shows how documentary filmmaking evokes the uncanny, creating 'spectres of the real.' In the gallery and on film, and in the documentary project within surrealism in particular, the uncanny is apprehended in the blank spaces and silences of history and subjectivity [1, 3, 5].</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

Cowie questions how documentary reality emerges, and how we are engaged by it. She reaffirms documentary film's central place in cinema, challenging received ideas about its form while developing a new understanding of the spectator's relationship to the realities that documentary films seek to represent.

The research was undertaken at Kent by Elizabeth Cowie: Lecturer (1981-1992), Senior Lecturer (1992-1998), Reader (1998-2005), Professor (2005-Present).

3. References to the research

1. Elizabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011). (REF Output No. 3)
2. Elizabeth Cowie, 'Thinking Differently,' *Differences*, vol. 21, no 2, (2010). (REF Output No. 2)
3. Elizabeth Cowie, 'On Documentary Sounds and Images in the Gallery,' *Screen* vol. 50, (2009). (REF Output No. 1)
4. Elizabeth Cowie, 'Seeing and hearing for ourselves: the spectacle of reality in the Holocaust Documentary,' in *The Holocaust and the Moving Image: Film and Television Representations Since 1933*, eds Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman, (London: Wallflower Press, 2005).
5. Elizabeth Cowie, "What do you see? Would you like to move on to another image? Yes' on Clío Barnard's *Road Race and Dark Glass*, catalogue entry, Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury, (2007) www.cliobarnard.com/assets/darkglass/cliobarnard-catalogue.pdf

Project funding

6. AHRB Research Award (AN9356/APN14771); The documentary project: audio-visual evidence and reality as entertainment; 2003; £9,026.

4. Details of the impact

Cowie's research into documentary has created an intellectual framework that invigorates debate on the relations between documentary, art and politics. Widely-used nationally and internationally within HE curricula, and influencing the work of curators and filmmakers, her work on documentary enhances teaching, research and creative output in film, digital media, and the gallery.

International HE curricula

Cowie's substantial body of research has notable reach and significance within the academy. Central to the study of documentary, her scholarship has enriched the design and delivery of HE curricula in relation to the history of documentary, debates about fiction and non-fiction, as well as theories of spectacle and spectatorship. Her work is also influential in Holocaust Studies and Moving Image Art practices. The significance of Cowie's research for curriculum design internationally is evident in courses from Brown University, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, New York University, Temple University, and the University of Texas (USA); York University (Canada); the University of Bilkent (Turkey); and Monash University (Australia) [1]. *Recording Reality* is currently being translated into Chinese.

Curatorial practice

The reach of Cowie's research is further evident in the diverse ways that curators have used Cowie's ideas to inform their understanding of documentary. Hitomi Hasegawa, a curator for the on-line project space [Frame](#), draws on Cowie's work on documentary and spectacle to explore the computer as peep show [2]. Rattanamol Singh Johal places his discussion of his curatorial practice in the context of Cowie's argument that 'Documentary as installation in the gallery disturbs the

categories of both “art” and “documentary” [3].

Artists’ film and video

The cultural significance of Cowie’s impact is visible in her creative dialogues with a number of international filmmakers and multi-media artists. Through these exchanges, Cowie’s research has enabled these artists to gain new understanding about documentary art, enriching and modifying their aesthetic and political strategies.

A key theme of Cowie’s work is a concern with documenting the experience of trauma and violence. Cowie has a long-established dialogue around these themes with Serbian artist **Milica Tomić**, who has exhibited in (among other places) New York, Sydney, London, Venice, Vienna, and Moscow. Their dialogue brings to public attention debates related to political violence, memory and trauma. Tomić states: ‘Elizabeth’s work as a film theorist, intellectual and educator has had the most formative influence on my work. Elizabeth’s work...not only break[s] new ground in my understanding of film and art, but...our intensive and continuing discussion [has] helped me to understand and revisit the complex relation[s] between art, psychoanalysis, politics, and media.’ Tomić further comments that Cowie ‘is a kind of intellectual who has no fear to go far beyond academic understanding in relation to art practice and the role of the artist;’ she also notes the significance of Cowie’s work in ‘stimulating...my wider artistic and intellectual community.’ Tomić has discussed in particular the ‘direct influence’ of Cowie’s theories on her 2012 piece, *Four Faces of Omarska* [4].

Violence and memory is also taken up in Cowie’s dialogue with Spanish artist **Juan delGardo**. This conversation developed from her early engagement with delGardo’s photographic project ‘The Wounded Image,’ and her later DVD commentary for delGardo’s [Who Are You Entertaining To?](#) presented at his exhibition in Colombia (2009). delGardo writes: ‘I came to a deeper understanding of my photographic and film practice through Elizabeth’s subtle articulation of what was present as performance in my work. Our discussions have enriched my work, and her recognition of what I have been seeking to achieve in my art in relation to trauma and disability, as well as to space and place, has been especially encouraging, and continues to resonate in my work’ [5]. delGardo notes the continuing influence of Cowie’s ideas on his works *Fluctuations in Time* (2011) and *Sailing Out of Grain* (2013).

Greek filmmaker **Giorgos Kravaritis** verifies the influence of Cowie’s thought on aesthetics and political documentary in his experimental documentary ‘essay’ *Dokime* (2013), which invites viewers to reflect on the veracity of documentary films. Kravaritis’ approach to the reliability and truthfulness of documentary filmmaking is directly inspired by Cowie’s book *Recording Reality*, and was further shaped through detailed feedback from Cowie during the editing process. He writes that ‘a big part of my thinking on documentary owes much to [Cowie’s] research. [Her] work was very influential for the film’s chapter “on ideology” [6].

Cowie’s long-standing research into spectatorship and political engagement informed her exchanges with the internationally-exhibited multi-media artist **Adam Chodzko** during his AHRC Creative Arts Fellowship at Kent. Cowie’s research provides an important part of the intellectual underpinning to Chodzko’s artworks. Chodzko writes that Cowie’s understanding of art practice and her enthusiasm for his project, mixed with her critical challenges, was ‘very important to [him] during [the] Fellowship’ in helping to develop his practice and in deepening his understanding of identification and fantasy, concepts especially relevant to Chodzko’s *The Pickers* (2009). More generally Chodzko notes the continuing influence on his work of Cowie’s research on ‘art documentary’s engagement with the social and the political’ [7].

Of her productive dialogue with Cowie, award-winning filmmaker **Clio Barnard** writes that ‘Her ideas [about *Dark Mirror* and *Road Race*] were an inspiration, encouraging me to develop further my formal interests in performance and in pushing the boundaries of documentary, as well as my personal interest in the idea of the displaced voice through re-enactment’ [8]. Addressing how Cowie enriched her filmmaking, Barnard continues: ‘*The Arbor* benefited directly from [Cowie’s]

Impact case study (REF3b)

intellectual rigour and...generosity in imparting...theoretical ideas about documentary...guiding the practice as research...To discuss with and learn from someone with such a range of understanding about documentary was very supportive and stimulating' [8]. *Dark Mirror* and *Road Race* were formative in the development of *The Arbor* (2010), an innovative film that explored re-enactments of the displaced voice [see case study c: Making Films and Changing Lives].

In summary, Cowie's considerable cultural influence is built on a substantial body of research central to the study of documentary internationally. Its impact is evident in HE curricula on documentary, fiction and non-fiction, Holocaust Studies, and moving image art practice, and in the practice of curators, artists and filmmakers.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Examples of Cowie's research having national and international significance in higher education curricula:

The history of documentary and the debates about fiction and non-fiction in documentary

- [Massachusetts College of Art and Design, USA](#)
- [New York University, USA](#)
- [Temple University, USA](#)

Holocaust Studies

- [University of Texas, USA](#)
- [Brown University USA](#)
- [University of Bilkent, Turkey](#)

Moving image art practices

- [University of Creative Arts \(UCA\), UK](#)
- [Monash University, Australia,](#)
- [York University, Canada](#)

Evidence of Cowie's impact in the field of curation

2. Hitomi Hasegawa in '[Peep Show: Has the Computer Become the Contemporary Peep Box,](#)' Hasegawa uses Cowie's writing to give context to her choice of exhibits: <http://www.no-w-here.org.uk/frame/index.php?m=pdetail&id=1&pg=2&focus=statement&l=>

3. Rattanamol Singh Johal, in 'Displacing the Objective Interlocutor, Infiltrating the Gallery: Notes on Art & Documentary,' *Augmenting Practices, Experiments from the IFA-KHO-J Curatorial Residency 2011*. Johal cites Cowie as an important influence on his understanding of curatorial practice: <http://www.khojworkshop.org/project/12017>

Testimonies and evidence of dialogue with artists and filmmakers

4. Milica Tomić can attest to collaboration with Cowie and her influence on Tomić's work as an artist and documentary filmmaker.

5. Juan delGardo can corroborate Cowie's impact on his photographic and film practice.

6. Giorgos Kravaritis: email dialogue between Cowie and Kravaritis affirms that Cowie has enhanced his understanding of the documentary form.

7. Adam Chodzko can confirm the extent to which Cowie's research provided an intellectual underpinning for his multimedia artworks.

8. Clio Barnard can attest to the influence of Cowie's writings on her work as a film director.