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Tape Recordings Into Radio Documentaries

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It was John Grierson, the film maker and teacher, who first used the term 'documentary' in the sense we are now familiar with. In 1926 he applied it adjectively to a film of Robert Flaherty's, and by the early thirties the word was in quite common use and Grierson himself was well on the way to becoming the man who more than anyone else brought about the development of such films. Somehow the term filtered through to the world of radio in English at a time when a similar art form was emerging.

"Beyond the newsmen and the magazine men and the lecturers," Grierson said, "one begins to wander into the world of the documentary proper, into the only world in which documentary can hope to achieve the ordinary virtues of art. Here we pass from the plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it."[1] Grierson recognised that 'documentary' was, as he put it, "a clumsy description"[2], but he summed it up as "the creative treatment of actuality",[3] and that definition serves us equally well.

Roughly speaking, there are two categories of documentary in sound. One is concerned with prepared material - material that has been researched and written, and is then performed in a studio by actors or narrators. Although it is somewhat removed from reality, it is nevertheless a product of actual events, actual people or ideas. It is not a fiction, in the way that most dramas are fictions. It can, however, contain scenes in dialogue purporting to be re-enactments of real or possible occurrences. Historical documentaries often belong in this category, particularly when they have to be reconstructed from books or manuscripts. In the early days of radio this was the main form of documentary. It was usually performed live on the air, with the help of manufactured sound effects.

The other kind of documentary comes from recordings of happenings and in particular from extempore comments, discussions and reminiscences. Material of this nature can be mixed with prepared narration or commentary or, in special circumstances, with an impersonation of someone who really exists or existed. Whatever is scripted usually relates to what has been gathered or 'found', either elucidating it or providing some sort of continuity.

1. Grierson on Documentary, by John Grierson, revised ed. of 1966, Faber and Faber Ltd. London. p. 146
2. Ibid. p. 145
3. Ibid. p. 13. Quoted in Introduction by Forsyth Hardy.

Before the days of sound on tape, recordings for radio had to be made on large wax discs at a speed of 33 1/3. In the late thirties radio people were actually using this process to make documentaries, or what the B.B.C. called 'special features'. They had mobile recording units and a microphone cable that might be anything up to a hundred yards in length. Both live and recorded broadcastings were done from locations such as the dungeons of Edinburgh Castle or a cottage in the Outer Hebrides. The editing process was quite complex, but nevertheless they could put together a program of considerable detail. It was managed by having as many as six turntables with fixed parallel arms along which glided the needle and head. The sections required were marked on the discs and these were started and stopped as required and the whole mixture was dubbed onto another disc.

But it was not until after the last war that recording on tape was sufficiently perfected for it to be the tool of this new art form, and then, not only was the sound quality superior to that obtained by the disc recording, but the aparatus itself was much more flexible, both for editing and recording. Then more than ever the microphone could indeed be carried out into the streets or the countryside so that the event itself could be captured in sound, which afterwards could be manipulated in a variety of ways. In fact the tape recorder is now an instrument of historic significance, not because of certain presidential scandals, but because already it has found a place in people's day to day lives as a serious tool or lighthearted toy, along with the typewriter, the camera and before very long, the portable videotape recorder.

Even more to our purpose, as with a film camera it can be the instrument of and artist, an artist in sound, who can perhaps be thought of as first cousin to the composer of music. The latter, however, unless he works with electronic music, has to rely on others to interpret what he writes as indeed does the writer of a scripted documentary. Whereas it is quite possible for today's artist in sound to gather, arrange and play his own composition without recourse to anyone else. Tape reduces sound to a strip of plastic, leading to new possibilities for manipulation. Time becomes space which can then be transformed back into time.

How well I remember my first opportunity as a CBC radio producer to splice together a program on my own. Hitherto, because of union regulations stemming from the early days of radio, it was necessary to give elaborate instructions to a technician, which meant using his hands instead of my own, which was very

frustrating for both of us unless what was required was very simple. It often meant that the raw material had to be turned into typescript, complete with 'ums' and 'ers', which had then to be marked with instructions. As a result one tended to use one's eyes rather than one's ears. Experiment was avoided along with having second thoughts.

So having the tape in my own hands was a new and wonderful experience. It sharpened my ability to listen and to make quick decisions in matters such as timing. I could make any number of experiments in editing without feeling that I was wasting someone else's time. For me, that was when the whole thing became an art, because the tape itself became a medium, much as the brush and pigment and canvas of a painter is his medium.

There are several ways of compiling a documentary in sound. What I am about to describe is merely my own way of doing it. Of course we are not here concerned with the scripted documentary because in large measure it has already been compiled by the time it reaches the studio. Our concern is with the documentary that is based on tape recordings of happenings and even more on talk about happenings, because in most cases a recording of mere sounds will not tell us very much, in fact many happenings have no sound at all, and we have to resort to running commentary or recollection to portray them; which stresses the fact that we are inevitable concerned with people, and in particular with what they have to say. Their voices are the material from which the average documentary is compiled.

Here is where the sound documentary differs once more from that of the film. The process of recording on film is direct and matter-of-fact, except in so much as the camera man must frame his shot, use a particular lense, etc. The silent camera shot is either its own explanation or is explained in the context of the shots which are associated with it. Hence the camera and camera man are on the outside looking in, and there is usually nothing visual between them and the object or event trying to interpret it. But our material is more subjective, not because the simple sound recording of an event is any more subjective than the visual record but because for the most part, the event comes to us through speech and hence through a human reaction. Radio is not 'hot' in the Marshall McLuhan sense merely because it happens to be sound, but because it is speech and music, the latter being a product of human intellect and emotion. Speech communicates outwardly from the inside, often from a degree of involvement.

The recording process itself is important in view of all the variables that stem from: (1) the kind of microphone used and where it is placed in relationship to a speech or an event:

(2) the nature of the aural space - that is to say, the quality of the indoor or outdoor space surrounding the event and revealed in overtones and reververations:

(3) background sounds, such as aeroplanes, birds and clocks.

You may want to neutralise these effects as much as possible by placing a directional microphone close to the source and hoping for the best, or simply waiting for the background noise to stop. Whatever you do you have always to be aware of the total sound environment, otherwise when you have brought your tapes home and want to cut from one speaker or event to another, you may find that the sense of location has suddenly shifted, or that an aeroplane's engines have suddenly ceased.

On the other hand, far from wanting to neutralize such effects you may want to employ them, because of what they say about the environment. Whatever you are looking for, every time you work in a new location you can save yourself a lot of trouble by recording a minute or two of nothing but background sound and aural space. There is no such thing in nature as silence, not even in a studio; and even when you are not aware of it the tape will be 'alive' and very useful later on for spacing, and also for blending when you want to make a smooth transition from one location to another or fade to a narrative.

When all extemporaneous material has been gathered, whether it be speech or actual sounds, I listen to each tape, typing a rough outline as it plays. The take-up reel is marked in intervals of five minutes, and with this I am able to note the whereabouts in time of any section I may want to refer to later simply by typing the number in the margin. From these outlines, and from other relevant material, I plan the scope and shape of the documentary and decide what other kinds of recorded material I want to use, such as narrative, sound effects or music.

Then I choose what has to come out of the tapes, and usually I write a number in the outline against each extract, indicating its position in the whole sequence. Then each piece is cut out and marked with its number and deposited in a correspondingly numbered box. These boxes are open and placed in order on specially constructed shelves within easy reach of the work bench. There are enough boxes to

handle forty sections of tape at a time, long or short. The very long sections get rolled onto reels. When all the pieces have been extracted, all that remains is to splice them together in sequence, winding them onto a take-up reel as I go, with the result that I get a 'rough cut' of the extempore part of the program.

It may be necessary to splice these pieces onto two or more separate tapes, which will later be mixed in some way or other. For instance, one tape may consist of the sounds of the event, while another contains a narrative or a 'recall', that is to say, with someone talking about the event in retrospect; and these will have to be blended together according to a precise arrangement which is usually written into a script for the guidance of the technician who is handling the final stages.

Next comes the refining process, culling unnecessary words and pauses, as well as extraneous sounds, rearranging sequences and making sure that each piece has the right relationship to its neighbour on either end in regard to continuity or contrast, or to the time lapse in between them. The listener should not be aware that a cut has been made, and the way the spaces are shortened or lengthened with 'live' tape is particularly important, as they can preserve or modify the flow and the rhythm. One of the signs of sloppy work is when a listener has the feeling of being jerked from sentence to sentence, chop by chop.

All this may seem like putting together an article or story from passages that have already been written. But, of course, it is much more than that, because with the editing process you are carrying forward your whole creative involvement in the work. I like to think of the joining of one piece of tape to another as a form of 'montage' in the sense in which Eisenstein used the word. One has sometimes heard 'collage' used in this connection, obviously because one piece of tape is glued to another. But the term is borrowed from a method of picture making and suggests to me something static, whereas 'montage' not only refers to the superimposition of images one on top of the other, but to their sequential movement, as in a film.

There is more to it than that. Eisenstein says, "The juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot - as it does a creation. It resembles a creation - rather than the sum of its parts - from the circumstances that in every such

juxtaposition the result is qualitatively distinguishable from each component element viewed separately."[4]

Suppose, to give an example, you made recordings on widely separate occasions of two people who happened to be talking about the same thing or something related, and you splice a phrase from one recording to a relevant phrase from the other, the result could be an enrichment, a new meaning, that was not apparent in either phrase when listened to separately. The same principle is inherent in most other forms of art.

A word about the tools with which one has to work. All my editing is done with a razor blade on an editing block, which is a small bar of metal with a groove which holds the tape in place while it is being cut and joined with splicing tape. The tape has been recorded on full track at a speed of 7½ inches per second, except when it has been made a 3 3/4 i.p.s. or on a cassette, in which case a copy has to be dubbed at the right speed. A copy is also made if the original has to be preserved.

I prefer to work with 7 inch reels, simply because the smaller ones are too fiddly and the larger ones require a larger and less flexible machine to play them on. The tape recorder on which one edits has to be able to be started or stopped instantly, and allow a section of tape to be marked for precise editing and quickly extracted and reinserted.

Of course, whatever implements you have, editing is a rather slow process, particularly when the material needs a lot of tightening, or the program is complex. It can take many hours, but this is all part of the game. It is not a matter of hastily reducing a speech or conversation to size for information broadcasting. A documentary is not reportage. It is a piece that conveys its quality and meaning partly by the careful selection of material and partly by the imaginative and creative way in which this material is handled. Some documentaries, hopefully, will no more grow old than a specially fine recording of a piece of music.

Often during the making of a 'fine cut' I am simultaneously writing the narrative or commentary. There must be a close interrelation - so close that even the inflection and pace of the narrator must at times take over from what comes before, or act as a springboard for what follows.

4. The Film Sense, by S. M. Eisenstein, Harcourt, Brace and Co. New York, 1942, p. 7

After the narration, introduction, credits and other scripted passages have been recorded in the studio, supposing you need any of them, and they have been spliced either onto a separate one, the final stages have to do with whatever mixing is necessary, or the addition of sound effects or music, all of it being recorded with the help of a technician onto the final tape, the one that will be broadcast. At the same time volume levels are adjusted, particularly when the material has been drawn from a number of separate recordings.

After which there may still be gaps to be closed or opened to enhance the timing, or sections must be cut out because of the need to keep the program within a prescribed time limit. In fact, all along the question of the length of the program has been at the back of one's mind. As our instinct for such things develops, one generally gets to know quite early on in a production how much material is needed.

Of course the final packaging process can be quite simple if it is just a question of mixing two tapes, say a narrative and a recall. Indeed, one could have already spliced these together on a single tape, so that all the technician had to do was watch the levels.

The simplest and most usual combination comes from alternating extemporaneous recollections with scripted narration or commentary. When I compile programs of this sort, unless I have recourse to one really outstanding speaker with a sustained story to tell, I like to use several speakers. In recording them I will have tried to avoid background sounds and also to minimise the effect of the aural space by placing the microphone as close to the speaker's mouth as possible without distortion. One has to look out for whistling sibilants, the clicking of false teeth, or 'putting'. But with reasonably neutral background qualities there is freedom of manipulation. It is far easier to add background sounds or reverberation than it is to remove them once they are there.

I was able to make good use of aural space and background at the time of recording in a program about the first crossing of the Rockies by the explorer and fur trader, David Thompson, in 1807.[5] It was also about a journey made in 1972 by Peter Haworth and myself, following roughly the same route. We stopped at various places, turned on the tape recorder and talked about what we saw and what Thompson was likely to have seen and done at the same

5. A Journey of Two Summer Moons. CBC Tuesday Evening, 1974

place. So the locale is defined in the program not only by our remarks, but by background sounds such as belong to a quiet river, a rushing mountain stream, bulldozers building a dam, a windy promontory, birds, the gurgle of water under a bridge, road traffic, a train. From time to time one hears also the voice of an actor impersonating David Thompson. He reads extracts based on the day to day jottings that Thompson made in his journal at roughly the same places in which we found ourselves. In this manner time flickers back and forth through a hundred and sixty-five years as the program moves through the landscape. And in fact because impersonation is employed rather than impersonal narrative, one has the feeling that Thompson is writing and talking beside his fire at the end of the day's journey. Just as we in our conversation slip into the past, so Thompson's subjective reactions and observations are brought into the present.

Incidentally the David Thompson story is as good an example as any of the relationship of actual time and space to what is contained on the tape. Two journeys of well over 200 miles each are told on approximately 3150 feet of tape. Thompson's journey took over two months, ours about a week, and both of them are dealt with in about 90 minutes. The story is condensed by a ruthless selection made from about seven hours of extempore recording and an equally ruthless condensation of the material in Thompson's reports and journal.

There are times when packaging may be so complicated that one has to mix and remix, starting and stopping tapes at precise moments. Lots of fun! And you're praying all the time that it's going to work. One summer I accompanied a troop of scouts travelling in riverboats up the Parsnip River, over the divide between Arctic and Pacfic waters and down James Creek. Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser had made the journey in 1792 and 1805 respectively, but very few people since as James Creek is a shallow mountain stream in a not too accessible corner of British Columbia. The recordings I came back with included sounds of voices around the camp fires, outboard motors, poling, sawing through log jams, hewing a trail across the divide and hauling the big riverboats up and over, negotiating the rapid water beyond, hitting rocks, grinding on gravel bars, shouted orders, exclamations, and finally the splutter of helicopters as they came to our rescue when after days of rain it had become too dangerous to navigate the swollen river. I recorded my own running commentary as well as on-the-spot conversations. When we got back to Prince George I interviewed some of the participants, and eventually

I wrote and recorded a personal narrative that not only helped to explain what was going on, but to condense the 'epic' into two one-hour programs.[6] And as a bonus we recorded actors who impersonated Fraser and Mackenzie with material drawn from the accounts of how they themselves navigated those same waters under rather similar weather conditions, meeting with log jams and beaver dams in precisely the same places as we did.

In putting all this together one was making use of six different kinds of recording: sounds of the event, personal running commentary, on-the-spot conversation, later recollections, scripted narration, and scripted impersonation. Here are five of them.

SOUND: A RUSHING STREAM, VOICES OF BOYS IN AND OUT OF THE WATER, MANOEUVRING THE BOATS. SOUNDS ARE HELD IN THE BACKGROUND THROUGHOUT.

ORCHARD (AS NARRATOR. STUDIO RECORDING): Well, we were working our way down past one of the several log jams we had to saw through. The stream was getting swifter all the time. There were rocks and gravel bars everywhere.

BACKGROUND SOUNDS BECOME MORE INTENSE.

SIMON FRASER (STUDIO RECORDING): Aye. The 'bad river'. It was well named by Sir Alexander. Often the current runs with such velocity that a canoe cannot be stopped by poles. Indeed we could only do this by laying hold of branches, and even then we would drift a hundred, or sometimes three hundred yards, before we could bring ourselves to.

VOICES (EMERGING FROM THE BACKGROUND): Good!! Now pull the stern around. Heave! Have to go down aways and tie her up. (SOMEBODY STARTS SINGING. SOUNDS OF BOAT DRAGGING ACROSS GRAVEL, THEN TRAVELLING IN DEEPER WATER.) Guess what? The water's wet.

ORCHARD (RUNNING COMMENTARY FROM ONE OF THE BOATS): They found they had to run a piece of swift water before they could stop. Now typing up near a gravel bar.

ORCHARD (STUDIO RECORDING): I was usually in the lead boat, so we often had to wait for the others. There were many sharp bends and sudden rapids or rocks....

We are dealing here with three periods of time; the time of Simon Fraser, the time of the event and the time of the event being recalled in retrospect. The focus shifts from one to the other, although sounds of the actual event run as counterpoint throughout. This was particularly effective a few minutes later when the voice of Alexander Mackenzie describing in detail how his only canoe was

6. The Riverboys and the Fur Traders, Pt. 1 and 2. Between Ourselves, 1971

smashed and fell apart, is accompanied by the splashing and shouts of the boys as they wrestled with their own craft in the swift, icy water. In this way even the sounds get overlaid with another reference, another meaning.

It was possible to introduce the artificiality of an actor or two into what was essentially a record of something actually taking place, because the actor impersonated someone who was far removed in time from the event, though not in place. This also applies to the use of the David Thompson material. But no actor could have represented someone taking part in the contemporary event.

Returning to the story of the riverboys, because recordings were made at different times and in different circumstances, we were able to contrast one with another, simultaneously and sequentially, and so produce a tapestry of sounds and voices - a counterpoint - was produced that widened the dimensions of the main event to give it greater significance. As in music, the lines of counterpoint had to relate and harmonize in a general way. One had also to know where the emphasis was, the line that was carrying the theme, in other words, the dominant voice.

But we must beware of carrying the analogy of music too far. I think that some of us, in an effort to expand the boundaries of the documentary, have at times had an urge to treat speech as if it were music and compose 'speech fugues' or 'speech sonatas'. I believe that for the most part we are on the wrong track because a musical phrase is not the same thing as a sentence. A sentence is composed of words, which are symbols. They are not the relatively pure sounds of music. Words are strung together according to the accepted rules of a language. Music has a very different grammar and logic, and indeed one musical sequence can very easily be imposed on another or lose itself in the music as a whole, and we can still comprehend all or most of what the composer is saying. On the other hand we must hear enough of a verbal sentence to grasp its meaning instantly. If we lose a subject or a verb we can only too easily lose the whole thing and have to grope back in an effort to fill the void. In the mean time the speaker goes on talking, and we lose more and more. To miss the meaning of a sentence is to reduce it to mere sound.

So it follows that, while music can be enriched by contrasts in timbre, and by piling on notes at differing pitches, several voices, if superimposed indiscriminately - or even according to some musical notion - become nothing more

than a monotonous noise. If we manage to catch a sentence here and there, we only end up with a feeling of frustration. This is especially true if each voice comes from the same level of remove or has the same focal definition.

It is quite possible to play around with words, images and sounds in an impressionistic way. But the relationships have to be meaningful, however far apart they may seem. It is also possible to use voices as mere sound. In one program I told in scripted narration of a visit I made to an old Indian burial ground.[7] As I did so, there was mixed into the background the voices of myself and friend, recorded as we were poking around and discussing who was buried there. From the odd word or phrase that could be heard through the narration it was obvious that the two levels of remove were referring to the same event. But for the most part the actuality was the mere sound of two people on the site instilling a quality of place. When the narrative stopped, our voices came into focus as if rising to the surface. This worked particularly well because one level was recorded out of doors and so was more diffused than the more sharply defined narrative, which was recorded in a studio.

I once complied a program about people going through Hell's Gate in the Fraser River Canyon in a rubber dinghy.[8] One voice recalled the incident as seen from the bridge above, an alternate voice described the sensation of going through twenty-five feet under water at the end of a life line, having been swept overboard. This kind of montage, where we cut from one subjective focus to another - a sort of double inner vision - is one of the more interesting possibilities of the sound medium.

Moreover, it lends itself to stereophonic treatment. Even when the original recordings have been made in mono, two separate tapes can be so manipulated on the control board that voices can be projected from either side or from the middle, or even made to cross from one side to the other. But as a rule and extempore type documentary is more likely to be involved in the reporting of events rather than their simulation, so there would be no particular point in having voices alternate from side to side.

Yet it is conceivable that certain extempore documentaries might benefit by being recorded in stereo if events in sound are an important feature - such as the raising of a totem pole, or the descent of a wild river in boats or rubber dinghies. But I shudder to think about the complexities of this kind of operation.

7. Kitselas. Between Ourselves, 1974
8. The Canyon. People in Landscape series.

It could nevertheless be worth doing under special circumstances, if only because of the capacity of the portable tape recorder to preserve, in stereo just as in mono, the sounds of actual events and reactions to those events.

With due respect to the technical and creative possibilities we have been examining, let us not forget that there is still no substitute for the natural qualities of a human voice communicating a human experience - the power of the spoken word. A single expressive voice, speaking extemporaneously and without interruption, can absorb our attention for half an hour or more, simply because it can em race so much of what we have been looking into. The speaker may at one moment be telling about something in which he is then and there involved, or he may be recalling what has been registered in his memory. He selects what he wants to talk about and arranges it instinctively in a particular sequence. A change in mood or attitude may change his vocal qualities and tempo. He may even venture into an impersonation. Anything added to the one voice might only succeed in taking away. Because what is so frequently important is that we come to experience what lies behind the voice - namely the person. There is no stronger means of communication than the current that flows from one being to another, even when carried by a piece of tape. If we wish to diminish the person by the simultaneous use of other sounds and voices, we must have a very good reason for doing so.

If this brings us face to face once more with the human element - with life itself - that is as it should be. That is what all documentaries in sound are about.

At present they are put together merely for broadcasting, although sometimes they find their way into classrooms. As skill and sensitivity increases it could be that more and more documentaries will be made to endure, much as any work of art, particularly when the subject matter is of more than passing interest. They will then not only be played and replayed on radio or in the classroom, but will find their way into private homes. They will be heard in public places where people can just sit and listen, which is what I like to refer to as arena sound. Documentary tapes will be sold in the same way that a musical recording is sold, and this is beginning to happen already.

Obviously the 'creative treatment of actuality' in sound has an important future, along with the many other products of the tape recorder.