

# Seven Up

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## 2 The Place of *Seven Up* within British Documentary History

*49 Up*, to date the last in the series, seemed especially reflexive, the ‘children’ particularly aware of the act of filming, notions of contrivance and performance. At the end of her interview Suzy, who has always been a reluctant participant, says in response to Apted’s question ‘Have you had enough of being in the film?’: ‘Who knows in seven years whether I’ll be done again, but this is me saying hopefully I’ll reach my half-century and I shall bow out.’ The increased reflexiveness of this last instalment has been viewed by Apted and Lewis as a fairly direct testament to the influence of reality television – although Apted states categorically that ‘I think that was in their minds, it wasn’t in my mind’ (Apted, 2007). There is, for example, Jackie’s argument with Apted (examined in more detail in Chapter 3) that, on the surface, possessed similarities with ‘reality television’ and the formatted documentaries that had grown around it. Of this interaction with contemporary factual programming around *49 Up*, Apted speculates that it

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had become an issue in a way it hadn’t been before – were we lumped in with a whole scenario of exploitative, cheap, primetime television? I think they’re asking themselves ‘Is this what we’ve been part of all these years?’ They definitely wanted to talk about it. (Ibid.)

Because of the particular synergies with the dominant culture of factual broadcasting in the early 2000s, how *Seven Up* relates to television documentary in general is currently especially interesting. Modern 'factual entertainment' (such as reality television) specifically signals its constructedness through its very form; it also fails to make a definitive distinction between the 'real' person and the 'performance', a slippage that frequently troubles critics but that nevertheless lies at the heart of Jackie's attack on Apted and her greater willingness to break the code of a series such as *Seven Up*. The series is also, conversely, an intriguing documentary subject because, despite its topicality, it has remained virtually unchanged for over forty-two years and so has proved to be, as a text, stable, resilient and not overly subservient to the shifting tendencies in documentary film-making. In keeping with its longevity and relative stability, *Seven Up* is also representative of a persistent fixation in British cinema and television documentary upon the quotidian and the personal – and how best to show them.

22 The original programme blended an interest in the ordinary, non-celebrity lives of its children with a significant political agenda. As an Independent Television Authority (ITA) memo from 1964 discussing a number of contentiously political current affairs programmes made by Granada in that year suggests, 'although not edited before transmission' (for impartiality etc.), 'Seven Up!'

was subsequently seen as primarily designed to illustrate, and indeed emphasise, a social, economic and educational gulf in this country, and to have achieved this end by a careful selection of participants and by subtle editing. It could well have been interpreted as a general argument in favour of State education. (ITA Paper 126 [64])

Notwithstanding the programme's 'soft' origins, it fell firmly within an already established and still vibrant British tradition of small 'p' political documentary and realist film-making. The editing, for example, which the ITA singles out here could be characterised as a 'soft' version of intellectual montage: interested in juxtaposing alternatives (such as class

differences, educational differences, ideological differences) but not in order to ram home a strong political message. Instead, as Douglas Keay's voiceover says, the strategy of this original programme is to temper its underpinning, latent didacticism with a less clearly biased, more passive notion of arriving at a conclusion via exploration and observation. For example, the opening line of voiceover is, '*World in Action* enters the struggling, changing world of the seven-year-old,' thereby laying out its observational stall, while, barely a minute later, Keay remarks, 'They're like any other children – except they come from startlingly different backgrounds,' a line that has been repeated in all of the programmes since.

Apted's series is frequently but confusingly likened to films of the Direct Cinema movement (such as Robert Drew's *Primary* [1960]), I assume because they are roughly contemporaneous. However, the series as a whole is far from observational (for a start, it is based upon a series of interviews) and the first film in particular is heavily didactic in style and tone. More than anything *Seven Up* exemplifies the sustained and characteristic fascination in British documentary and the realist dramatic tradition with the life more ordinary, more than with observation *per se*. An important aside to this discussion would be the possible reasons for the relative critical neglect of both Free Cinema and *Seven Up*. The big story of late 1950s<sup>2</sup>–mid-1960s' documentary is technological advancement – that 16mm became smaller and lighter, that film stock became better able to deal with low light and that synch sound was made possible by the greater portability of new recording equipment. This story is automatically and invariably told within histories of documentary in relation to Direct Cinema, although it could just as interestingly be demonstrated with reference to Free Cinema: from the release of *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957) to that of *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959) barely two years later, for instance, one can see the arrival – and dramatic impact – of synch sound. As Karel Reisz remarked, during roundtable discussion chaired by Kevin Macdonald at the National Film Theatre (NFT) on 22 March 2001, John Fletcher, the 'technical wizard' of Free Cinema,



welcomed on *The Lambeth Boys* the opportunity to shoot synchronous sound on unrehearsed material ... we didn't know what was going to happen, and that was technically extremely advanced for the time, and Jean Rouch, the great French documentary maker said that these films of ours started him on all his ethnographic films. (NFT, 2001)

Free Cinema is a relatively neglected branch of the international observational documentary movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, probably marginalised in favour of the French *cinéma vérité* movement or the American Direct Cinema movement because its main exponents (Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz) swiftly abandoned documentary film-making for feature films. This shift from non-fiction to fiction in turn gives a pertinent insight into *Seven Up*, as the social realism of films such as Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) or Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961) suggested other ways in which issues of class and social divisiveness could be 'softened' through dramatisation without being marginalised. (There is also an obvious parallel between the Free Cinema directors and Michael Apted, who likewise made the rapid transition to television drama and film directing.)

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'Free Cinema' was the label given to a brief series of largely British documentary films screened at the National Film Theatre from 1956–9, specifically, as the programme notes for Season One (5–8 February 1956) state, to differentiate them from more commercial, industry-funded and thus supposedly compromised feature films. The Free Cinema manifesto is elusive but evocative of the director's idealism:

No film can be too personal. The image speaks, sound amplifies and comments. Size is irrelevant. Perfection is not an aim. An attitude means a style. A style means an attitude. Implicit in our attitude is a belief in freedom, in the importance of people and in the significance of the everyday.<sup>7</sup>

As with the use of pointed editing in 'Seven Up!', what is being indicated here is that the Free Cinema directors saw style and choice of subject as

attitudes in themselves; that a point could be made simply through giving 'people' and the 'everyday' screen time. Raymond Durnat, dismisses Free Cinema for achieving only 'a kind of middle-class left-wing sentimentality within the purlieus of the art cinema and the film society' (Durnat 1970: 128), concluding that the movement offered nothing new at all and was merely 'a highly self-conscious part of an inevitable and massive trend'. He is being harsh, as the concentrated body of work that made up Free Cinema did show how documentary could adopt some of the Lukácsian tropes of drama, for example, by using individuals to represent contrasting, sometimes conflicting social groups. Probably Durnat is correct to suggest that these are middle-class films that treat those at either extreme of the social spectrum as interesting and freakish, and 'Seven Up!' could be accused of doing much the same. What is significant about the sequence in 'Seven Up!' showing the class of 'posh boys' singing 'Waltzing Matilda' in Latin and



The prep-school boys singing 'Waltzing Matilda' in Latin

the sequence in *Momma Don't Allow* (1956) in which the well-to-do jazz enthusiasts arrive at the club and dance awkwardly, self-consciously alongside the free-moving, confident and fluent working-class couples is not that it is stating the obvious – which it is – but that it is using observation to make a ‘soft’ comment about social difference.

*We Are the Lambeth Boys* is the Free Cinema film that ‘Seven Up!’ echoes most closely: its subjects are teenagers as opposed to children, but the unformed and naive views they spout (their views on capital punishment which, as Durgnat remarks, are ‘decidedly at the Alf Garnett end of the spectrum’ [ibid.: 127]), as well as the manner in which they are used to evoke and function as the representatives of a recognisable social class, offer parallels with Almond’s documentary.

26 What had also not been possible much earlier had been sustained location filming on feature films. The moment of transition here was *A Taste of Honey*, shot entirely on location in Salford and Blackpool, unlike earlier British New Wave films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, another Woodfall production released only a year previously, which had made substantial use of studio sets. The immediacy of Richardson’s adaptation of Shelagh Delaney’s play is aspired to in ‘Seven Up!’, which used a hand-held camera in particular to draw its audience into identifying with the children, a feature of the original film’s *mise en scène* that is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. By the mid-1960s the advancements that had been made in cinema – both fiction and documentary – were becoming equally influential in television. Indeed, it could be argued that the British New Wave was as short-lived as Free Cinema had been, as, with the release in 1963 of the big-budget, far more flamboyant *Tom Jones* (Richardson for Woodfall, with a screenplay by John Osborne), the tradition of ‘gritty realism’ had been passed onto television – both fiction and documentary.<sup>8</sup>

In November 1965 the BBC launched *Man Alive*, its own social subject documentary and current affairs series. Like *World in Action*, *Man Alive* occupied a thirty-minute slot and the series started on 4 November 1965 with ‘The Heart Man’, a documentary about Texan

heart surgeon Michael de Bakey. The second-week slot was filled by ‘The Man Who Started the War’, a study of Nazi secret agent Alfred Naujocks, who masterminded the German attack on a radio station on the Polish border which transmitted a bogus anti-German broadcast that was used as the catalyst for the German invasion of Poland. Naujocks escaped lightly with only three years’ imprisonment, but as the programme is made – using the title of his own memoirs – he fears, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the trial and execution of his old friend Adolf Eichmann, that his past will catch up with him. This, Jeremy James’s commentary informs us, is Naujocks’s first interview for film; why he agrees to make the programme is never clarified. The format of this *Man Alive* episode suggests how in keeping with the factual output of its time ‘Seven Up!’ was. James’s voiceover, for instance, is extremely dominant and insistent (it really would be impossible to follow ‘The Man Who Started the War’ without it), much as Douglas Keay’s is; it also manifestly tells the *Man Alive* audience how it should respond to the film and how the accompanying images should be interpreted. After orchestrating the successful attack on the radio station Naujocks informed Nazi headquarters and then went to bed; the voiceover says melodramatically: ‘Naujocks slept for eight hours and freedom slept for six years,’ over archive of Nazi tanks and infantry thundering into Poland. This episode of *Man Alive* has a dramatic story to tell (although the presumed conclusion – Naujocks’s capture or final evasion of the Nazi-hunters – is never reached), which is told via an interview with Naujocks (the first) and lengthy sequences of Naujocks, often in close-up, going home or walking through the crowded streets of Hamburg enacting his desired anonymity. One shot stands out: a low-angle close-up of Naujocks’s face in a sequence in which the voiceover stresses his loneliness; the purpose of this and the other mute shots of Naujocks’s features is, presumably, to make us scrutinise this unpenitent, elegant Nazi. Never does ‘The Man Who Started the War’ explicitly attack Naujocks’s politics, but its point of view is not hidden behind equivocation and balance; the programme-makers, rather like Almond and the *World in Action* team, appear confident in their interpretation of this story and equally sure that in



bringing this story to the attention of a television audience they are doing the right thing. As the concluding voiceover remarks: 'He's a man with a past he's not being allowed to forget.'

As its filming style and choice of subjects suggests, *Man Alive* was principally about people and as Harold Williamson, one of the series' early producers, was later to acutely and entertainingly characterise, it was a strand that eschewed 'professional talkers, or politicians, or academics, or self-styled experts' in favour of 'those who'd lived the experience' and whose

stories, vividly expressed in their own words, reflected almost every facet of social significance that had grabbed public attention over the past ten to 15 years: abortion, mugging, gays, swinging Sixties, drug-taking, body-building, arson, contraception, women in prison, senility, health foods, alternative medicine, neighbours, whiz kids, worker sit-ins, torture, children in care ... (Williamson, 1983: 8)

- 28 With the arrival of drama series such as the BBC's *The Wednesday Play* (30 September 1964–20 May 1970), which in its first two years broadcast Ken Loach's *Up the Junction* (3 November 1965) and *Cathy Come Home* (16 November 1966), the recounting of topical subjects via individual stories defined much drama as well as documentary output in the mid- to late 1960s. Although this is discernibly the dominant trend of the time in both documentary and realist drama, it would be entirely erroneous to suggest that this approach was the only one. In 1967, for example, the BBC launched its long-running arts programme *Omnibus* (13 October 1967) – using a similar format to its science counterpart *Horizon*, which had begun in May 1964 – and in 1969 the hugely influential *Civilisation* was shown, Kenneth Clark's landmark series examining the ideas and values that to him give meaning to the term 'Western civilisation'.

The second instalment in the *Seven Up* series – *7 Plus Seven* – was transmitted 15 December 1970. In terms of British television documentary history, the 1970s were years of consolidation as well as

innovation, with the continuation of the major series from the 1960s. The 'lecture' format continued with Jacob Bronowski's series *The Ascent of Man* (1973), while *Horizon* and *Omnibus* were joined in 1977 by the BBC's religious affairs strand *Everyman*. The format of these latter three is significant and consistent: they are didactic programmes about a single historical or contemporary issue that fall into a shared general subject area (science, the arts, spirituality); they have frequently but by no means exclusively been presenter-led; they are often celebratory. The inherent didacticism of these strands is echoed in a series such as Thames Television's monumental *The World at War* (1974–5), which in turn has influenced just about every historical series since – particularly those whose focus is again World War II. At the opposite end of the documentary spectrum are observational series such as Paul Watson's *The Family* (BBC, 1974), a British version of Craig Gilbert's *The American Family* (1973). Watson's series began transmission before shooting was over and became 'a documentary about an "average" family whose private life is repeatedly exposed on national television' (Winston, 1995: 205), well before – but certainly paving the way for – docusoaps in the latter 1990s.

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In much of her work artist Gillian Wearing has interrogated the representations of reality found in British television documentaries such as *The Family* and *Seven Up*, which she often cites as a particularly important influence on her work (Tate, 2001; Schwabsky, 2004). Of her 2006 work 'Family History', a work centred on her memories of watching *The Family* as a child, Wearing remarks: 'I found it surprising watching normality ... There had been nothing like it on British television. There was *Coronation Street*, but that was too acted, too nostalgic to be real' (Jeffries, 2006). *Seven Up* is arguably compelling for comparable reasons: it is surprisingly interesting watching other people talk about their ordinary lives. As Sue remarks at the end of *42 Up*:

Before the film starts you think, 'What on earth have I done in that last seven years that I could possibly talk about?'. Then you panic and think

'I should have done something dramatic' ... I was hoping I'd win the lottery last night, but life's not like that.

There is an intense and arguably voyeuristic interest in banality at the heart of both a series such as *The Family* and, although executed quite differently, *Seven Up*. There is also a shared interest in the intermingling of intrusion with observation and Paul Watson's work since *The Family*, such as *The Fishing Party* (1986) and *Sylvania Waters* (1993), reinvigorated this documentary tradition.

30 Considering the intrusiveness of *Seven Up*, there is an affecting moment in *49 Up* when Tony's wife Debbie reflects upon Tony's admission on camera during his interview for *42 Up* that he had been unfaithful to her, commenting, 'I wish things that were said then were never said', before recounting that their daughter Perry had not gone to school for three weeks after the programme had gone out because of the shock the revelation caused. As Debbie muses: 'you are their mum and dad'. As with either *The Family* or *Man Alive*, what *Seven Up* is perpetually doing is 'coaxing' its subjects (as Williamson suggests) into making personal revelations for the benefit and entertainment of camera and audience. Williamson is recalling his experiences of revisiting subjects of early episodes of *Man Alive* for a new series *Only Time Would Tell* (1983). He recounts his attempts to track these people down and the discovery that many of them did not want to appear in any follow-up programme or be reminded of their past. Williamson discovered that, although in many cases, the filming experiences had been happy ones, the problem had been the aftermath: that

For a long time after the programme went out – sometimes for years afterwards – they had been got at by neighbours, or family, or colleagues who, for one reason or another, were angered, outraged, ashamed, envious or offended by their television broadcast. (Williamson, 1983: 8)

The peculiar brand of notoriety that follows an appearance in an intrusive observational programme such as *Man Alive*, *The Family* or



arguably *Seven Up* is a significant and enduring legacy of this style of film-making, and one that predates the more overtly accepted and desired celebrity that appearances in more recent reality and formatted shows bring.

Between *21 Up* (1977) and *28 Up* (1985) a shift towards a more distinctly observational style is evident, exemplified by Roger Graef's series *Police* (1981) and the BBC2 strand *Forty Minutes*, which ran from 1985–94 under four executive producers: Roger Mills, Edward Mirzoeff, Caroline Pick and Paul Watson. Unlike series such as *Seven Up* or *Man Alive*, *Forty Minutes* was rarely voiceover- and interview-dependent (this is not to say that it did not include interviews, but these were rarely formally framed and shot, as with Molly Dineen's workplace interviews with various people who work at the Angel underground station in *Heart of the Angel* [1989] as they go about their jobs). The *Radio Times* entry for the first *Forty Minutes* ('Rough Justice', produced by Karl Francis) is revealing about the series' intentions:

### 9.30 *New Series*

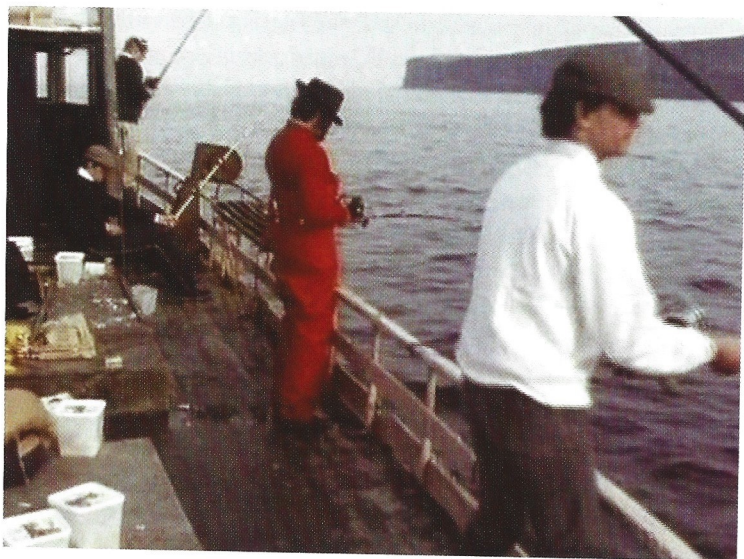
#### *Forty Minutes*

... of documentary. A series of films portraying issues, stories and characters.

**Rough Justice.** In the Working Man's Institute of Merthyr Tydfil, Dilys Hardacare is up in arms. She's a working woman, but she's still not allowed to join the men at the snooker table. And Howie will soon be in serious trouble. He can't find a job, can't afford to stand his round, and he's beginning to lose his bottle. Around Dilys and Howie, the choir sings. The housewives keep fit and the old men reminisce. Life in the valley isn't what it was. There's no pit in Deri now, and John Jones Treorchy is long since dead. But the humour survives, and it's amazingly peaceful considering ...

(On the adjoining page there is a more personal account of the film by its producer.)

This description (more than likely written by the press office, not the programme-makers) emphasises the tendency of *Forty Minutes* to find microcosmic social, personal stories that can be used to represent



Paul Watson's controversial film *The Fishing Party*, broadcast in 1986 as a *Forty Minutes* on BBC2

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macrocosmic political structures and arguments. In particular *Forty Minutes* repeatedly demonstrated the potential for wider relevance and signification of the observational form.

Around the time that *28 Up* was broadcast, *Forty Minutes* had entered its heyday with memorable films such as *The Fishing Party* and Molly Dineen's television debut *Home from the Hill* (22 January 1987). Watson's programme, which viewed now seems unbelievably leisurely in its editing and pacing (no music, very little voiceover, languid shots of the Scottish coastline), was a contentious documentary. Filming with four male City friends while on a fishing holiday in Scotland, Watson captured several of the men's unguarded and misguided comments about class, money, race and gender. Those who took part were convinced the film had ruined their lives, and when *The Fishing Party* was re-shown in 2006 as part of BBC4's *40 Minutes On* series, it still had the capacity to shock. As one viewer wrote on the BBC4 'Have Your Say' website:

I must say I was simply shocked at ... the sexist and racist views of the gentlemen in *The Fishing Party* ... I watched with utter disbelief as their disdain for human life and utter cluelessness about the human condition were made clear.

*Seven Up* offered an alternative though not incompatible way to tackle comparable problems, often illustrating the human side of a social issue through its interviews. In *28 Up* the most devastating interview is probably with Neil, whom we had seen at twenty-one depressed and living in a squat after dropping out of university, and who at twenty-eight is drifting around Western Scotland, living off social security. It is in *28 Up* that Neil is interviewed against the staggering beauty and ostensible tranquillity of a Scottish lake talking about how he does not want children as they would be more than likely to inherit some of his unhappiness and instability. As Moran notes, Neil is inclined in all of his adult interviews to give his life story a social or philosophical context (Moran, 2002: 395); he, like Bruce, who repeatedly reminds us of his privilege relative to the underprivilege of others, draws out naturally the *Forty Minutes* tendency to impose general meaning onto the individual's story. By *28 Up* this has actually become harder to achieve, as it is with this episode that Apted has started to edit the programmes differently. With this shift, *Seven Up* – and in this it parallels *Forty Minutes* – becomes less overtly political and more subject-driven.

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Although the observational mode has rarely been accepted without criticism in Britain, its overriding interest in ordinary life has been embraced. Graef's thirteen-part series *Police* was a more authentic example of observational documentary film-making than *Forty Minutes*, despite its choices of subject matter, ever was. Graef used film as record, as with 'A Complaint of Rape', the series' most frequently cited episode in which the brutal, insensitive questioning of a woman who claimed she had been raped was filmed over her shoulder to conceal her identity (see Winston, 1995: 209). But, as Winston stresses 'Graef is in many ways exceptional' and his practice 'very much at odds with' (ibid.: 210) the BBC norms of the time, for example, in terms of his high shooting ratios.

In the main, the potential inconclusiveness of observational documentary has, on British television, been averted by the imposition of guiding features such as narration, entertainment value or authorial intervention (as in the cases of Dineen or Nick Broomfield). As Winston notes, Graef's work recalls that of Frederick Wiseman; besides Graef, there are many British film-makers (such as Broomfield) who cite Wiseman or the Maysles brothers or Don Pennebaker as inspirations, but relatively few of them who mimic their purer observational style. *The Fishing Party* or *The Leader, His Driver and the Driver's Wife* (1991), Broomfield's portrait of white South African separatist leader Eugene Terreblanche are largely 'observational' in approach but they engineer situations that prompt their subjects to make controversial statements, a significant byproduct of which is their entertainment value, as when Terreblanche gets angry at cameraman Barry Ackroyd and calls him 'a monkey in a bloody tree'.

34 Despite an enduring preoccupation with ordinary lives, British television documentary has also been equally interested in using or devising ways of telling the ordinary story in an overtly entertaining manner. In some cases the additional factor is humour, in others it is a dramatic voiceover, in some it is undisguised stylisation, which unambiguously signals a film's constructedness. This last approach, for instance, characterised much of the BBC1 series *Inside Story*, whose seasons under Paul Hamann (from 1989) were probably its most memorable. Arguably influenced by Errol Morris's extravagantly cinematic noir-ish style in films such as *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), *Inside Story* became synonymous with the hyper-stylisation of a film-maker such as Chris Olgiati, whose attention to visual style as much as content continued into such series as *Signs of the Times* (1992), Nicholas Barker's groundbreaking dissection of personal taste, and later *Modern Times* (1995-8). Apart from a shared interest in the individual's story with *Forty Minutes*, this is the era when *Seven Up* seems at its most anachronistic as, unlike so many other series (*Inside Story* included), it did not attempt to repackage or reinvent itself.

By the 1990s there were probably more parallels to be drawn between *Seven Up* and other approaches to representing ordinary life. In 1990 *Video Diaries* began in which members of the public with a tale to tell or an opinion to showcase were given a camera and technical assistance with which to put their stories across. It is alongside the innovation of a somewhat ‘auto-personal’ form of factual broadcasting that the seismic shift that occurred elsewhere in terms of how British television – and the BBC in particular – interpreted the observational, people-based documentary with the interrelated and virtually coincidental demise of *Forty Minutes* and arrival of *Modern Times* in 1995. With hindsight these changes seem significant. *Video Diaries* was self-evidently a diary format and although the series itself has petered out (having been followed for a while by the ninety-second films of *Video Nation*), its popularisation of the ordinary person’s video diary has continued into reality television (the ‘*Big Brother* room’) and formatted documentaries (the video links and end-of-the-day video diaries used in *Wife Swap*).

The replacement of *Forty Minutes* with *Modern Times* seems to me to be of comparable significance as it marked the passing of a classically observational strand with one that was always far more preoccupied with style and aesthetics. *Modern Times* was a manifestly ‘slavish imitation’ (Barker, 1999) of Nicholas Barker’s seminal 1992 series for BBC2 about the interior-decorating style and taste of ordinary people. *Modern Times* was launched by Executive Producer Stephen Lambert as a series that considered visual style to be as important as documentary content, an ethos Lambert (who at RDF has been the founding father of formatted documentaries, producing *Wife Swap*, *Faking It et al.*) has continued into later work. It is interesting to what extent *Modern Times* and Lambert’s influence more generally have guided what constitutes a documentary strand for ‘modern times’, as it signalled a move away from primarily content-driven to a far more self-conscious, constructed kind of film-making.<sup>9</sup>

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What had altered between *Forty Minutes* and *Modern Times* was not so much subject matter as approach. Barker once mentioned



that he envisaged *Signs of the Times* as an extension of the observational tradition established by *Forty Minutes*. What attracted Barker to this mode was its observation of minutiae, the ostensibly insignificant details of the everyday, an obsession that lies at the heart of *Signs of the Times* as well as the portraiture of photographer Martin Parr, to whom the series is explicitly indebted. Instead of reproducing the traditional observational *form*, however, of hand-held camera, minimal director presence and unobtrusive editing, Barker couched his fascination with observing the everyday within a highly self-conscious visual aesthetic, pioneering a reflexive approach to observational film-making that, in a variety of ways, remains omnipresent on British television.<sup>10</sup>

36 At the heart of the changes that took place in the 1990s in British documentary film-making was a questioning of the traditional relationship between film-makers and subject as a means of understanding documentary's performative base. A more explicit 1990s' example of this is the emergence of the auteur-performer films on television of, among others, Nick Broomfield, who was then mimicked himself by someone such as Louis Theroux. It is not that Broomfield's method was completely innovative (Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* [1989] was contemporaneous with *Driving Me Crazy* [1988], the first film in which Broomfield appears), nor that the film-maker's presence within the reflexive documentary was itself new, as Apted's presence in the *Seven Up* series itself attests. What is significant is that such a reflexive style became so widespread and added to the sense that the documentary genre had in general become crucially aware of its inherent performativity.

In many ways *Seven Up* had always been aware – and had signposted – its own constructedness, for example, through its referencing and re-editing of past programmes, clear indications that 'reality' is a fluid, mutable concept and in perpetuity dependent upon context and contextualisation for signification. There are also the repeated references by many of the interviewees to Michael Apted by name and Apted's personalised voiceover and questioning style ('When

diverting viewers from what is being said onto what is being done, a move that has had far-reaching consequences for documentaries since – so much so that in the early 2000s film-makers seem downright wary of using straight interviews, fearful presumably that we would find people talking too dull. Now interviews are too often nervously broken up with reconstruction, music, archive or other diversionary tactics.

Docusoaps, having dominated British television screens for five years, found themselves out of favour almost as abruptly as they had been heralded as the new force in television documentary. The cause of this disappearance is commonly assumed to be the triumphant arrival of *Big Brother* in 2000. The Endemol series was not the only new format around that time, however, for the surprisingly successful *1900 House* was also broadcast (again – in the UK – on Channel 4) in 1999, another key early example of what soon came to be called ‘reality television’. What both these series and all the ones that followed clearly exemplify is a triple impulse in contemporary factual programme-making: the need to know where a film or series is going (hence the use of an imposed format or narrative structure, which remains unchanged from week to week); the desire to build into this format a greater level of audience participation; an attraction to documentary subjects not as ‘real people being themselves’ but as performers who enjoy being on television.

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The contestants of the first series of *Big Brother* (Channel 4, 2000)



we last met ...' etc.). The demise of *Forty Minutes* was the result not only of conventional observational programming becoming unfashionable but also due to a fundamental realisation on the part of many broadcasters about the performative nature and potential of documentary: in essence that what is most interesting about documentary is not the idea of a fixed truth being imparted to a largely passive audience but the far more liberating notion of a changeable truth that can be affected by, among other factors, the act of viewing.

The implied presence of the viewing public – whether they are addressed directly in reality shows by being asked to vote contestants on or off programmes or whether their presence is indicated indirectly via an ironic style or voiceover commentary – has continued to be a determining factor for factual programming in Britain. At around the same time as *Modern Times*, docusoaps emerged, with pioneering series such as *Vets' School* (1996). Just as, in terms of strands, *Modern Times* took the place of *Forty Minutes*, so it seemed in the mid-1990s that docusoaps took over more or less directly from traditional observational series such as *HMS Brilliant* (1995) and *Nurse* (1998), both shot on 16mm film over an extended period of time, both made by directors (Christopher Terrill and Jenny Abbott) who 'went native' and lived alongside their respective subjects, and both focused on observing the intricate interpersonal relationships built up within a working environment. There were significant overlaps between such series and docusoaps, as well as equally significant divergences. Docusoaps originated in BBC Bristol under producers such as Nick Shearman – now at RDF Media with Lambert – before spreading to other BBC centres and to ITV (Stephen Lambert, for example, was the BBC's executive producer on *Lakesiders* [1998]). Like earlier observational series, docusoaps focused on working environments and personal interaction (a vets' school, a vets' practice, a driving school, a clammers' office, an airline, a shopping mall, a hotel, a cruise liner), but the balance had shifted. No longer was the emphasis so much on how one learns about the working environment via observation but more on how entertaining people can be when working and/or going about their ordinary business: Maureen in *Driving School* has several near-misses

while learning to drive in her Lada; the clammers sing Christmas carols and Jane McDonald sings for the customers on a cruise liner; camp airline stewards act up for the cameras; a hotel manageress and cook have a vocal argument. Complementing this shift, the docusoaps' formal style was similar to that of soap operas, hence the term: they have fast-paced title sequences that introduce the characters in the episode to follow, usually by their first names; the editing style is fast and each episode cuts between two or three individual storylines; the emphasis is on character, emotion and amusement value; all series have a prominent voiceover, often narrated by someone well known and often ironic or patronising in tone.

Ironically, the episode in *Seven Up* that most closely resembles docusoaps in format is 'Seven Up!' itself, which does cut between the children and which does arguably edit their comments and observations (for example Andrew, Charles and John talking through the cons of state-funded education) for heightened entertainment value.

38 Later episodes in the series, however, appear relatively serious and conventional when compared to docusoaps: the editing style from *28 Up* is far less frenetic, as on average each individual story is given around 15–20 minutes; Apted's narration is largely factual (and often remains relatively unchanged from one episode to the next); the primary motive could no longer be construed as trying to squeeze as much instant entertainment value from the interviewees as possible. The principal difference is that docusoaps tend to dwell on people doing things rather than just talking, so they talk as they are performing an action. This is a simple inversion of how later episodes of *Seven Up* handle their subjects, as interviews take priority and sequences of the interviewees doing things (Jackie taking her three sons to the park or John visiting a children's home in Bulgaria in *49 Up*) are largely illustrative. Conversely docusoaps continuously mix action and interview as Jane McDonald in *The Cruise* confides in Chris Terrill's camera while applying her make-up or Maureen Rees in *Driving School* talks about her life as she goes about her cleaning jobs. The docusoap's intermingling of action and interview has the inevitable consequence of

In 2006, the year after *49 Up* was transmitted, UK *Big Brother 7* started; as the contestants on *Big Brother* and *Celebrity Big Brother* get increasingly extreme (soon after the recovering anorexic has been seen crying on *BB7*, two men in a bed with one of the female contestants giggle that they have never groped a pair of false breasts before), so by contrast the interviewees on *Seven Up* start seeming bizarre in their straightness. From having been so intrigued by normality, British documentary has become ever more fixated upon the possibility of playing around with, as opposed to merely observing, ordinariness. This development alters fundamentally our potential relationship with the lives being enacted on screen by making viewers not so much voyeurs sneaking a peek at other people's lives, as if peering through someone's window while walking by, but rather co-creators of performative beings that have only come to life for and as a result of being on television. We are not prying in the same way as we might think we are when listening to the reluctant interviewees of *49 Up* because, as such binaries merge, there is no longer a really concrete sense of the private/public or off-/on-screen divide and private space – what these people might be like when the cameras are not on them – becomes an irrelevance. This process is completed as many of those who have appeared on *Big Brother* and other reality shows rapidly become minor celebrities in their own right, photographed by *Closer* or with their own column in *Heat*.

Although Jackie and others have become more aware of the manipulation (some would say exploitation) involved in *Seven Up* as a result of recent evolutions in television factual programming, their relatively stable presence in the series over more than forty-two years also accentuates some of the differences between Apted's series and reality television. At a recent conference examining the interconnections between art and documentary, Michael Renov observed that the people in documentaries 'do exert a certain kind of pull', a mixture of desire and curiosity which he terms 'epistophilia', concluding that such 'great curiosity' then prompts a series of ethical questions that negotiate and define the viewer's relationship to both that voyeurism and the subjects on the screen:

So then what? What kind of obligations do you have? What kind of responsibility do you bear for that other? I'm interested by the kind of language that artists speak about that level of responsibility, which either you take on or you choose not to take on. (Truth or Dare, 24–5 February 2006, Whitechapel Art Gallery)

I imagine that viewers care in this way for those involved in *Seven Up* much more than they do for the contestants on *Big Brother* or *Wife Swap*, largely because of the impact of being made to realise that these people have lives that, every seven years, are intruded upon. The artificially created environments of reality television serve to repress rather than amplify such an understanding of these individuals' lives.

But to conclude where this discussion began, by making a comparison between *Seven Up* and reality television: one factor that does still link *Seven Up* to *Big Brother* is that they both provide 'water cooler' moments of post-broadcast social interaction. Economist Martin Brookes has remarked upon the positive impact broadcasting can have on "social capital", the term given to the collection of shared values which shape society and provide the basis for trust between people'. Brookes argues that studies have linked social capital with improved health, reduced crime and better educational attainment and that the growth in the number of television channels and 'the consequent fragmentation of audiences will mean fewer shared experiences, thereby reducing social capital'.<sup>11</sup> The major differences between *Seven Up* and reality shows are on the level of how form and content interact as well as on the level of reception.

41

In delineating the differences between *Seven Up* and reality television Michael Apted opts to identify the underpinning differences between reality and documentary as a whole:

In reality people are put into an alien environment and you observe how they react. Documentary attempts to create life as it is, attempts to create life as the film-maker sees it; it doesn't try and contrive it or push it or distort it – it tries to reveal life as it is. That's the idea, anyway. (Apted, 2007)

However, these fundamental distinctions notwithstanding, both Apted and Lewis observed during the making of *49 Up* the indirect impact of reality television on how their interviewees responded to being filmed. As Lewis comments:

When we made *42* there was no *Big Brother*. The landscape has changed for me, between *42* and *49*. In those seven years television internationally had gone 'reality'. I started my research (for *49 Up*) – i.e. chatting to people properly – at the beginning of 2005 and it was absolutely obvious that reality television had made them all extremely wary of doing the film, of saying anything to camera, of being maltreated, or being made fun of. They all said it to me in one way or another. Only one of them would choose to go on a reality programme – Tony, who's an Equity member and would adore to go on *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me out of Here!* ... All the others hate being in the film, they hate the exposure, they hate the invasion of privacy. (Lewis, 2006)

- 42 How factual television has evolved has impacted directly, therefore, on how those who appear in a series such as *Seven Up* – conceived decades before the arrival of reality television – now define themselves. One potential result of the impact of reality on at least the consciousness of the subjects in *Seven Up* was Jackie's attack on Apted in *49 Up*. This is discussed at greater length in Chapter 3, but the main point of interest for this discussion is that, when Jackie accuses Apted of not having understood her or represented her accurately, certainly Lewis got the sense that the confrontational quality and reflexivity of reality television had influenced Jackie's decision to finally speak out, corroborating Apted's belief that comparisons with reality television were in the minds of his contributors at the time of *49 Up*.

Lewis and Apted have always been sensitive to the accusation of exploitation, in that the children were signed up, in the first instance, by their parents (John maintains that not even his parents but his headmaster gave consent for him to appear [ibid.]) and so did not give their own consent to be filmed until twenty-one. Mindful of this, the



series is not, for example, endlessly repeated. *Seven Up* endures in the memory more than it does in transmedia environments and, as a result, several of its contributors refer to the fact that for a few days or weeks after transmission members of the public come up to them or recognise them, but that their notoriety seems relatively short-lived. Herein lies the most significant divergence between *Seven Up* and reality television, namely that while it is generally assumed that the majority of the participants on reality shows get involved because they crave celebrity status, the subjects of *Seven Up* did not. As Nick comments wryly during the montage of interviewees talking about what it is like being involved in the programmes at the end of *42 Up*: ‘My ambition as a scientist is to be more famous for doing science than for being in this film. Unfortunately, Michael, it’s not going to happen.’ It has always been quite a struggle to maintain the interviewees’ involvement and the various tensions that characterise *Seven Up*, as well as its familiarity and relative formal stability within a constantly developing genre, are possible reasons for its continuing fascination.