

Towards Decolonising an Undergraduate Documentary and Reality TV Module: An Auto-Ethnography of Teaching Practice

Victoria Grace Richardson-Walden (orcid.org/0000-0002-5298-8810)

University of Sussex, England

Abstract

This article offers an auto-ethnography of decolonising work on a final-year undergraduate documentary and reality TV module. It recognises that decolonising must always be understood as an on-going process rather than something one can accomplished through a single review of curriculum. This article traces the beginning of this process. Whilst the module, which I adopted from a colleague on leave, already had a diverse range of documentary and reality TV texts and readings, I wanted to encourage students to participate in the decolonising process with me – to explicitly engage with the ways some academic writing about documentary has erased or marginalised non-Western histories of nonfiction production, how reality TV often reinforces colonial notions of representation and power which we can trace back as fundamental to the origins of cinema, and how some of the theoretical paradigms we explore in documentary studies such as ‘witnessing’ are rooted in Western epistemologies. If documentary studies is about encouraging students to be critical of what they see and hear in nonfiction production, it seemed fitting to also encourage them to be critical about the Western discourse which has shaped how we have learnt to think about such films and television programming.

Keywords: decolonising, pedagogy, curriculum, pluraversality, implicated subject, documentary studies



This work is published under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence. You are free to share and adapt the material, but you must credit the original author(s) and source, provide a link to the licence, and indicate if changes are made. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Introduction

This article presents an autoethnography of my experience of doing decolonising work on a third-year undergraduate module *Documentary, Reality TV and Real Lives* at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. I was the convenor of this module for two academic years: 2018–19 and 2019–20. I first situate this work within some of the academic discourse about decolonising the university. Then I briefly introduce my autoethnographic methodology, before presenting my reflection on the process of decolonising this module. I emphasise the word *process* here, for I do not see decolonising as something that can be simply completed by doing a small amount of work on a single academic module, rather I understand decolonising as an ongoing process and one I hope to have begun to play a part in *with* my students rather performing it *upon* their curriculum.

Decolonisation in Academia and Media Studies

Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu remind us that ‘decolonising’ is a contested term (2018). They draw attention to the critique of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Kang (2012) that decolonising is not a metaphor, but rather a political campaign for repatriation of indigenous land. Nevertheless, as Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu suggest, whilst this position is important to acknowledge, it does not relate to every nation that one could argue needs to do decolonising work. Like Bhambra, I am situated in a UK university, in a nation which once ruled the largest empire of the modern world. Yet, British people living in the UK would not consider themselves settlers (although of course white populations in many other countries can trace their British roots). There is an imperialist attitude, history and culture, however, that is deeply rooted in contemporary Britain, from the Political to everyday life, including the university, which needs to be undone. Therefore, decolonising these sites of knowledge production is a meaningful and urgent process. Nevertheless, I am wary of the possibilities of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ being appropriated by institutional agendas, in which the meaningful, radical work of decolonising gets squeezed out for the sake of ticking the right boxes to improve a university’s public profile and surplus income. One must be sensitive to these criticisms when doing decolonising work.

I use the expression ‘decolonising work’ to emphasise that decolonising is a process as suggested by its verb form, it is continual and involves *doing*. My approach to decolonising the module *Documentary, Reality TV and Real Lives* was not simply to evaluate my reading list or curriculum, or to include a week on race and ethnicity, all of which are at best tokenistic gestures and at worse reduce people of colour to “objects of scholarship” (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2018, p. 6). Rather it involved inviting my students to participate in a process of doing decolonising work throughout the module. Rachel Vandana Stone and Sylvia Ashton (2021) also warn against such tokenism,

emphasising that decolonising is an “ongoing process” or processes focused on “deconstructing ourselves”, “deconstructing our subject discipline”, “deconstructing our institution”, “deconstructing our students”, and “exploring our curriculum”. As Priyamvada Gopal argues, decolonisation is a “critical practice” (2012, p. 24). It is not an action that is simply completed, rather it is an ongoing and fluid activity which should be performed with students not simply to their curriculum (Stone and Ashton 2021). If as Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu (2018, p. 5) claim, “the Western university [is] a key site through which colonialism – and colonial knowledge in particular – is produced, consecrate, institutionalised and naturalised”, then I sought through the module to denaturalise forms of knowledge and knowledge production associated with the Western university. To achieve this, my aim was to foreground multiplicity (Dennis, 2018), dismantling the idea of any universalising of knowledge (as suggested by the term ‘university’) and instead prioritise a sense of ‘pluriversality’ (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), which acknowledges a knottiness, a complex interweaving and enfolding of different knowledges. In *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, Saer Maty Bâ and Will Higbee call for “polycentric, multi-directional, non-essentialized alternatives to Eurocentric theoretical and historical perspectives found in film as both an artistic medium and an academic field of study” (2012, p. 1). If one has been taught film or indeed media studies within traditional, Western universities, then such a de-Westernising project involves getting outside one’s own tastes. In their seminal work *Unthinking Eurocentricism*, Elia Shohat and Robert Stam highlight that any attempt at “polycentric multiculturalism” must be a “collective project” rather than an individual endeavour (1994, p. 6), therefore in the classroom it is best worked through as a group of co-learners, which includes educator and learners.

Methodology

I am indebted to the critical work of Carol Azumah Dennis (2018), which provided a methodology for approaching decolonising work with this module. Dennis offers ten tenets that she argues define decolonising pedagogy. I am going to offer a slightly abridged, but still lengthy quotation of them here, given their importance to the methodology I adopted in my teaching. I will return to these tenets through the critical reflection later in this article and thus it is of value to emphasise Dennis’s specific wording here:

1. Establish a space within which it is possible to speak about decolonisation [...]
2. Recognise and reflexively explore your own implicatedness [...]
3. Interrogate the existing cultural interpretive monopoly of European knowledges, assumptions and methodologies [...]
4. Identify those too frequently unexplored ways of being that are of most interest to you [...]
5. Acknowledge the curriculum in its breadth [...] not only the specific content taught, but also the way it is taught and the enactment of particular sorts of pedagogical relationships [...]
6. Refuse a single authoritative voice, perspective or approach [...]

7. Place the disciplinary founding fathers of philosophy and social science in their place [...]
 8. Locate unheard, silenced or trivialised voices relevant to your discipline – exemplify and amplify them, placing them alongside orthodox voices in an implicit motion of critique [...]
 9. Explore and identify the political implications of specific pedagogical approaches [...]
 10. Extricate your curriculum from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people and use the resources of imagination, organising, opposition and resistance in pursuance of that end, pausing only when it is accomplished.
- (Dennis, 2018, p. 202 [Numbering added])

Dennis argues that “when scholarship turns to the subject of decolonisation, it becomes embroiled in an embodied struggle. It becomes an intervention, a performative, reflexive socio-political writing action” (2018, p. 193). Dennis speaks of her struggle but persistence to write as the “unmarked scholar” so typical of Western academic traditions, in which the writer’s subjectivity and their context is erased from the literature, which gives a perception of neutrality (2018, pp. 196–97). However, Dennis at times slips into purposeful moments of subjectivity in her writing and rather than resist this, I write this article by foregrounding my subject position. I do this to highlight that despite the decolonising work that I did with my students on this module, I retain a specific position of power as the university lecturer and as the single author of this article, which has been written, unfortunately, too long after the teaching to enable me to contact the students and work with them on this. Thus, I adopt an autoethnographic approach in the analysis that follows.

My approach to autoethnography is inspired by Holt (2001) and Sparkes (1996), whose work tends to explore subjective experience in dialogue with academic literature, rather than offering a looser personal narrative. Such a method is not unusual for teachers, who are encouraged to engage in reflective practice throughout their careers. Furthermore, I choose to adopt an auto-ethnographic approach in order to speak from the liminal boundaries between subject position and object of study. It seemed particularly inappropriate to adopt a non-auto form of ethnography for this research given that much of the work we did through the module involved critique and reflection of the way historical ethnographic practices informed racialised and other forms of power dynamics through photographic and filmic techniques which had established norms in documentary and cinema more broadly. I do not claim to speak for my students here, but rather speak from the limited but nevertheless meaningful position of the reflective practitioner. Just as Dennis questions the colonial traditions of the ‘unmarked scholar’, autoethnography challenges “accepted views about silent authorship” (Holt, 2003, p. 19) and questions the traditional illusion of scientific objectivity in favour of legitimising “many ways of knowing and inquiring” (Wall, 2008, p. 39). Whilst such centralisation of subjectivity has been

criticised as a research methodology (Wall, 2008), it underlines the standards of good teaching practice – to reflect on one’s own experiences. Furthermore, whilst autoethnography may be “at risk of being overly narcissistic and self-indulgent”, Holt celebrates the method for its ability to link “the personal with the culture” (2003, p. 26). Thus, the following critical reflection on my teaching practice hopes to offer other educators a case study, which presents a framework through which to reflect upon the decolonising work they are already doing or inspire them to begin such a process. Thus, it aims to have an impact on the culture of university teaching, in media studies and related fields specifically, but also more broadly.

The reflection that follows is placed in dialogue with Dennis’s tenets of decolonising the curriculum (2018), in order to reflect upon the progress this module made in this work and what work could yet be done. I acknowledge the limitations of focusing on such a narrow subjectivity whilst paradoxically talking about a process which sought to foreground multiplicity. Nevertheless, writing from my own subjective perspective through autoethnography draws attention to the fact multiplicity involves many different subjects and that whilst different knowledges may entangle in the process of decolonising, I can still only claim to know this experience from my own embodied perspective. I also believe that such an approach will be particularly useful to the readers of this volume, who I assume to be media educators and thus will have the opportunity to share elements of my positionality, particularly in terms of their ability to take responsibility for leading on decolonising processes within our subject.

Reflections on Decolonising Work

Documentary, Reality TV and Real Lives is a third-year undergraduate module, which I taught in the academic years 2018–19 and 2019–20. It included 9 weeks of taught content. Each week focused on a specific theme with a 2-hour seminar and a 3-hour screening, complemented with a series of required and recommended reading. Suggested further viewing and reading lists for each week were extensive. Students were assessed through two activities: 1) A group presentation that provided a transnational study of a particular movement or documentary at a specific historical moment of their choice; 2) An individual essay from a list of provided questions, for which students could select their own case studies to examine. They could also propose their own question.

In both years that I was the convenor for *Documentary, Reality TV and Real Lives*, I did not make an explicit claim to students that we were engaging in decolonising work. Thus, one could argue that I did not appropriately establish a place for doing decolonising work (Dennis, 2018). I felt uneasy about drawing attention to this process as if we should celebrate ourselves for doing things differently to the Western status quo. Ethically, this is perhaps a questionable approach. However, my intention was to normalise decolonising work whilst denaturalising the canon within the subject. As the module unfolded, week-by-week and students were asked to consider the limitations and criticisms of canonic

work like the writing of Bill Nichols; historicise the techniques used in contemporary nature programming and reality television in relation to pre- and early-cinematic representations of racialised bodies; consider how and why platforms and subtitling exclude and include different cultures; and reflect on the accessibility of research materials that would enable them to map a more global history of non-fiction filmmaking, among other activities.

In my design of the module, I aimed to decentralise my own voice as much as possible, ensuring that our discussions focused on the voices of filmmakers, filmed subjects, and the authors of the critiques we read. In the first iteration of the module, one student proclaimed in their module feedback that they really liked the module because I told them everything they needed to know. This comment made me re-evaluate how much I might accidentally slip into a 'lecturer-mode' in our seminars, which I am aware I did in order to bring students from a vast range of subject backgrounds (from practice degrees to theoretical ones) to the same level on a topic. However, on reflection, I realised that whilst attempting to decolonise the curriculum, my practice was doing quite the opposite as it suggested students needed to be thinking in the same way, thus I was focusing more on decolonising content than thinking about the particular "pedagogical relationships" I was creating in the learning space (Dennis, 2018, p. 202). The second time the course ran, I constantly reflected on ways to maintain a position of co-learner by providing initial questions, encouraging students to question each other's contributions, and expressing active listening by asking further, specific questions to those who spoke. One student in that cohort commented that they liked the fact the module pushed them to challenge their own thinking.

I started out with the idea of a canon that I wanted to disrupt and challenge. For me, this was a US-centric documentary history, starting with *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922), working through cinema vérité to more contemporary filmmakers like Errol Morris and Michael Moore. This was the filmic canon of documentary studies that I had been taught and which in my initial teaching training years 15 years ago, I had taught, without questioning it, to foundation year students in an FE setting. The screening of week 1 was timetabled before the first teaching session and I purposefully placed a selection of films from that canon in this slot so as to place them on the periphery of the course – a prologue to a process of critically assessing this canon. Thus, whilst Dennis argues that part of the decolonising process is about identifying "those too frequently unexplored ways of being that are of most interest to you" (2018, p. 202), having been taught a Western and particularly US-centric approach to documentary studies, I decided to start by thinking how I could defamiliarise the field as it had previously been known to me. Nevertheless, there were personal biases in terms of my selection of themes, readings and screenings which spoke to particular interests of mine that had encouraged me to think differently and think against the documentary canon, as I knew it.

I did not entirely dismiss some of what might be construed as the “founding fathers” (Dennis, 2018, p. 202) of both documentary practice and theory. Rather, I structured the module so that students and I could work together to “interrogate the existing cultural interpretive monopoly of European knowledges, assumptions and methodologies” (Dennis, 2018, p. 202). I wanted to support students to develop the criticality to be able to question assumptions about documentary history and consider the potential limitations of documentary modes. This was the focus of the first few weeks of the module: ‘What is Documentary?’, ‘Rethinking Documentary History’, ‘Documentary Modes’, and ‘Ethnographic Film’. Whilst I attempted, in places, to curate a diverse range of screening and reading material, this was not the end. Diversification like this is about representation, which is important, but it is not engaging in a decolonising process and is often misunderstood as such. As explained earlier in this article, decolonising is a critical process. Diversifying one’s reading list but not decolonising one’s pedagogy is little more than a tokenistic gesture. It can be an easy way to feel as if one has done decolonising whilst it is not something that can simply be done.

This decolonising process was particularly emphasised in the first four weeks of the module. In week 1, ‘What is Documentary?’, I started by asking students how they would define the form and then asked them to rank different academic definitions, before comparing their own to these. We then discussed discrepancies across the class. From the readings, we particularly focused on Nichols’s (2008) distinction between scientific explanatory films and documentary rhetoric and considered ways in which documentary films might encourage us to take particular arguments as ‘truth’ through specific cinematic mechanisms, thinking through the work of Elizabeth Cowie (1999) and André Bazin (1971). Students were also asked to respond to the two films screened pre-course: *Nanook of the North* and *Primary* (Pennebaker, 1960), with some context given in regard to Flaherty and issues of reconstruction, and the cinema vérité movement. They were asked to consider how familiar these films are to them as documentaries. Whilst week 1 was still very much situated within a perceived canon, I recommended that the students think about the readings, arguments and texts that had been introduced this week in dialogue with what was to come, through which I had specifically attempted to encourage them to think about different approaches to studying the subject.

The week 2 seminar began with students given copies of a content page from Erik Barnouw’s *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film* (1993). I explained to them that I had performed a basic search for ‘documentary history’ at the British Library – our country’s largest publicly accessible collection of reading and other material – and this contents page was illustrative of the majority of sources the search had produced for me. This does not mean of course that this is the only history of documentary, far from it, and any of us teaching this subject will be more than aware of that. Nevertheless, I wanted to highlight to students how simple actions like library searches, which we take for granted as researchers, can reproduce the “cultural interpretive monopoly of European [or more

widely, Western] knowledges” and “assumptions” (Dennis, 2018, p. 202). We mapped out the history told by this contents page onto the walls of our learning space using flipchart paper and students were asked to identify what was missing or not amplified in comparison to other historical moments. The contents page started with the Méliès/Lumière division in early French cinema, which is often overstated. Then worked through Flaherty, Soviet filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, the GPO, cinema vérité and the French new wave towards contemporary US documentary creators with a final chapter on ‘global documentary history’ for everything else. Such a historical narrative is probably not unfamiliar to many readers.

I then tasked students to work in groups of their choosing to complete a 1-week mini-research project focused on documentary history in one of the broad contexts marginalised by the book’s narrative. The contexts I gave them were very wide, which on one hand was problematic as it re-emphasised Western specificities, such as thinking about British, French, Germany etc., versus a generalised regional otherness, e.g. South America, Africa, Asia. On the other hand, the aim – which was explicated to the students – was for them to start wide and then to focus on a specific region that interested them. Groups were welcome to select the same context as other groups and as one might expect, groups focusing on the same continent came back with different narrow foci. I provided some hints of names, collaboratives, events, or films that might be useful to their searches, but also explained that there was no necessity to use these. This project speaks to Dennis’s tenets in several ways. It refused a “single authoritative [...] perspective” (2018, p. 202) not only in terms of the different documentary theorists and practitioners the students encountered through their research, but also in the power dynamic of the classroom, as students were encouraged to be authorities on their project focus – acting as student-teachers, whilst I could become a teacher-student, listening and learning from what they discovered, expanding my knowledge simultaneously with them (Freire, 1970). I acknowledge here the tension of bringing critical pedagogy into dialogue with decolonising work and there is further scope for critiquing this which I do not have space to do in this short article. Most notably, that for Freire it is the suppressed who must do the work to change systems, whilst many thinkers exploring decolonising in the university context consider it a duty of those who benefit from the historical and contemporary suppression of others. Nevertheless, I felt Freire’s suggestions regarding altering the power dynamics of the learning environment speak to the work of highlighting multiplicity in decolonising work. Whilst I previously stated that I felt I prioritised decolonising curriculum over pedagogy, this particular activity did break down “the enactment of particular sorts of pedagogical relationships” (Dennis, 2018, p. 202), specifically the power dynamic between teacher and students.

Whilst Dennis speaks of identifying “unexplored ways of being that are of most interest to you” (2018, p. 202) as the teacher, this project also allowed students to enact this tenet of the decolonising process. Some students decided to engage with cultures about which

they knew very little; others focused on those linguistically and culturally familiar to them and which they felt able to speak about with authority. For example, one group of students from mainland China decided to teach us about the history of Chinese documentary and were able to discuss films not available in the English language. Another group, composed of British students of mixed racial heritage, said they had never thought about the very existence of African documentaries, but through the research project had learnt a lot about a topic previously unfamiliar to them.

Once the students had completed their research and presented their findings, they were asked to add key filmmakers, events, movements, and films to the timeline we had previously created around the classroom. We then took some time to consider how different activities around the world may have influenced others. This process of thinking through the relationality of the canonic history with a wider range of histories, allowed students to simultaneously interrogate Western narratives, whilst locating marginalised voices and individuals in relation to them, “exemplifying and amplifying them” in perhaps a more explicit motion of critique than Dennis suggests (2018, p. 202). By picking up board markers and creating this wide-reaching visualisation of intertwining documentary histories, students were taking on the work of decolonising in an embodied way, quite literally locating the different narratives onto the paper next to each other. Once visualised as a number of intertwining temporal narratives, students could begin to see how different movements, filmmakers and documentaries influenced others across space.

One of the readings for week 2 was Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), which helped students to critique the film *Colours of the Alphabet* (Cole, 2016). On one hand, this film represents issues of the colonial influence in language teaching in Zambian schools, which allowed me the opportunity to introduce the issue of language and documentary production. Here, I wanted students to consider not only whether documentaries speak with or for their subjects, but also how the choice of language used in interviews and for voiceovers also informs knowledge production (often selected by the director rather than the subjects). On the other hand, *Colours of the Alphabet* is produced by a white, British filmmaker but distributed through the Africadocs platform, which digitally distributes documentaries made in and about the African continent to those who live there, for free, but charges for external access. Therefore, we considered what documentary's communicative mechanisms might be, including but also beyond language. Could the gaze and delivery of rhetoric in a documentary contrast its representative aims? Why might students and educators in the West be expected to pay for access to these films whilst those in Africa do not? How did the students feel about being excluded from this free access and what might that tell us about the expectation we have to take knowledge from other regions, where Western nations have historically suppressed local knowledge production? Students were also introduced in this week to Bill Nichols's (2001) seminal work on documentary modes and Stella Bruzzi's (2000) critique of it, which would come to frame our discussions in week 3.

In week 3, students were asked to consider the extent to which Nichols's typology of documentary modes might be limiting, both in its sense of offering a historical evolution of the form and whether it held up to dialectical non-fiction works such as essay films. Could we consider films like *Gleaners and I* (Varda, 2000), *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* (Minh-ha Trinh, 1983), and *Handsworth Songs* (Akomfrah, 1987) to not be documentaries because they might merge modes or cannot easily fit into Nichols's typology? Otherwise, does the existence of such films offer different ways to think about documentary types, given that they very much foreground the 'rhetorical' nature Nichols elsewhere highlights as essential to the form? As well as thinking through the aesthetics, technical and representational aspects of these films, students were encouraged to think about where they might be screened and for whom. By working with Nichols in this way, rather than offering screenings which could easily be considered illustrative of his modes, I wanted not to dismiss his work but rather think about how we might "put it in its place" (Dennis, 2018, p. 202). Whilst Nichols introduces his modes through documentaries that I would mostly consider part of the canon, by placing his argument in dialogue with films from a diverse range of filmmakers and contexts, students were able to develop their own criticality in response to his approach. Once again, I did not attempt to force an alternative narrative as the better one onto students as if there was a new "single, authoritative voice" (Dennis, 2018, p. 202) they could rely on. Some students argued that Nichols's modes could be mapped onto these essay films through their dialectical form, claiming the modes came to speak to and interrogate each other, in a sophisticated argument. Other students believed that Nichols's typology was limited, particularly in relation to non-fiction filmmaking that was attempting both stylistically and representationally to challenge established Western norms of seeing and knowledge production.

I was reminded of the serendipity of the learning experience in preparing the recommended viewing list for week 3. I discovered *Occupation: Native – Biting Back at Australian History* (Trisha Morton-Thomas, 2017) on streaming service Kanopy, but on checking the subtitles for the film I noticed that indigenous, regional slang was subtitled as 'mumbling' despite that fact the pronunciation and volume of expressions was very clear. This was particularly pertinent in the first iteration of this module as one of the students required subtitles in order to access the films. It had been a challenge to find copies of many of the films which I had wanted on the screening list as part of my decolonising work, for example *Reassemblage* and *Handsworth Songs*. Nevertheless, I worked with this student to discuss alternative viewing where films were not available in accessible formats. Some of the documentaries were available on YouTube with awful subtitling, but as with *Occupation*, I noticed that this subtitling was least accurate when presenting patois (in the case of *Handsworth Songs*) and indigenous dialectics or phrases. So, it seemed fitting that we bring this into our class discussion – how the technologies of distribution and exhibition also need scrutinising, not only the intended representations of the filmmaker.

Whilst *Handsworth Songs* is far from a hegemonic, colonial project, the fact it is only available with subtitles on YouTube, via its automated subtitling program, means that in the digital space it has been appropriated into the problematic power systems which the filmmaker, John Akomfrah resists in his representations. The film is not available for educational purposes and is otherwise only accessible to the gallery sector.

After week 2 introduced the work of wa Thiong'o, for week 4, I asked students to read the writings of Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996; 2006), in which she builds on the work of scholars like Franz Fanon in relation to the history of ethnographic film. Rony's writing had been introduced to me when I was teaching on a module on Film Philosophy during my PhD at Queen Mary, University of London, and was certainly one of those "frequently unexplored ways of being that are of most interest to [me]" (Dennis, 2018, p. 202). The screenings for this week were in part influenced by Rony's work, including the pre-cinematic, racist depictions of black bodies in the work of Félix-Louis Regnault and *Trance and Dance in Bali* (Bateson and Mead, 1952). We explored how the former spoke to a wider cultural moment in which cinematic and photographic technologies were being developed through the racialisation of black bodies and within a wider context of also disabling white bodies identified as mentally ill – see Georges Didi-Huberman's (2003) analysis of Charcot's depictions of the latter. Difference in both cases here is pathologised and recorded on camera as if presented as scientifically objective. This week was a pinnacle moment on the module as we would come back to the way these bodies were objectified as 'savage' or pathologised through the excuse of science, whether Nichols's differentiation between the scientific presentation films and documentary stood true, and how such structuring of the gaze and language used to racialise these historical bodies continued in contemporary non-fiction programming, from nature documentaries to Reality Television in depictions of animals, people of colour, and working class individuals (further explored in weeks 5: Beyond the Human and 8: Reality TV).

The screening list for week 4 was substantial. After *Cronofotografia* and *Trance and Dance in Bali*, we critically examined attempts to resist racist representations and practices with *Afrique sur seine* (Sarr & Vieryra, 1955), often hailed as the beginning of African cinema, shot in France by Senegalese filmmakers denied the right to film in Senegal by French occupiers; *The Mad Masters* (1956) directed by Jean Rouch, both celebrated and lambasted for his style of participatory filmmaking; and *Statues also Die* (Cloquet, Marker and Resnais 1953), which is deeply critical of the deadening and exoticisation of objects from colonised regions in European national museums. I hoped to encourage students to think critically about the tensions at play in the production contexts of these films. Some of the content was uncomfortable to watch, particularly in *The Mad Masters* and *Trance and Dance in Bali*, and students were given content warnings before these were screened (I was particularly conscious of Rony's (2006) reading of seeing her own culture spoken about as an object of study in ethnography classes).

The week was structured as a potted history of ethnographic film, asking students to consider the extent to which some of the historical racialisation we had identified could be seen in more contemporary works. Here, we looked at Werner Herzog's *Woodaabe: Herdsmen of the Sun* (1989) – certainly one of the filmmakers I would consider part of the canon I was taught as a documentary student, and *Galsen* (2018), an auto-ethnographic film by first-time director Sergio Aparicio. Unlike the other films, *Galsen* examines Aparicio's experience of feeling between cultures, growing up and living in Spain where he is considered 'African' and returning to visit his country of heritage Senegal, where he is considered 'European'. I was very keen to include Aparicio's film as whilst many of the other works this week might be considered canonic either in the orthodox or in a more activist, left-wing documentary education, this was an unknown filmmaker. I only knew of his film because he had approached me with a screener when I was a volunteer programmer at a community cinema in London.

Designing week 6: 'Documentary Witnessing' allowed me to particularly "recognise and reflexively explore" not only my own "implicatedness" in reproducing European forms of knowledge production and approaches (Dennis, 2018, p. 202), but also the way the scholarship of our subject can do this. Documentary witnessing was one of the areas of the module in which I could bring my specific research specialisms to bear on the curriculum. Nevertheless, I was conscious that my own focus – Holocaust representation and memory – had dominated in the Anglophone witnessing discourse that I had encountered. I was interested in exploring films related to other cultural contexts, genocides and human rights issues which I had not yet had the opportunity to do in my own research. In moving beyond the Holocaust context here, it was a moment of reflexivity of my own implicatedness, particularly in relation to how Western and particularly European scholars of memory can take for granted pre-existing knowledge related to the Holocaust given its significance to contemporary European history. For many of our students who come from countries outside of this supranational context, the 1930s and 1940s have other historical and traumatic resonances, and there may be different moments and events that are more pertinent to their own cultural experiences and backgrounds.

One of the films I selected for this week was *S21: Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (Panh, 2003). When exploring the existing academic literature about the film, I was quite shocked that so much of it was rooted in Freudian trauma studies (see for example: Lê, 2014; Boyle, 2009) or compared the film with *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985), situating it within French film theory (Willis, 2014; Czenave, 2018; Galmard, 2018) which has dominated much of how cinematic Holocaust memory has been framed. Czenave (2018) argues that too much emphasis has been given to Rithy Panh's association with France at the expense of diminishing Cambodian aspects of the film. Beyond Czenave, there was little discussion about whether psychoanalysis – a particularly European conceptualisation of dealing (or not dealing) with the past – and debates in French film theory were

appropriate to the Cambodian context. Given European memory culture and politics have inflected on the official commemoration practices in Cambodia, from the modelling of exhibitions in Toul Sleug on Auschwitz–Birkenau and other Holocaust sites of atrocity to the controversial bone memorials created for international visitors, the development of a memorialisation culture as would be recognisable by the UN, and the USC Shoah Foundation's involvement in the creation of video testimonies for the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, it seemed particularly apt to think about these tensions. Nevertheless, Panh did train in France and has explicated how Holocaust films like *Shoah* have influenced his work. I decided therefore that after introducing students to some of the key debates, discourse and texts which are understood as foundational to studies of witnessing, we would work together to consider the extent to which the film conformed to or challenged this discourse and discuss how else we might understand it.

Week 7 of the module 'Animated Documentary' enabled us to discuss different ways of knowing, beyond the linguistic and ocular-centric modes of Western epistemologies. Through Annabelle Honess Roe's (2013) *Animated Documentary* volume, students were able to consider how animated documentaries enabled filmmakers to represent lived experiences which were difficult to portray through traditional, live action documentary. The films we discussed explored how trauma, alcoholism, autism, trans identity, alien abduction and absurd political interference under occupation could be felt. The films emphasised the imagined, the psychological and the embodied as ways of knowing that challenge the notion of official records and 'seeing is believing'. Whilst beyond the main focus of this week, students were recommended Laura Marks's (2000) *Skin of the Film*, which explores how 'haptic vision' is foregrounded in films that challenge Western orthodoxies about race, sexuality, and disability. The final week 9 would have been a student workshop exploring i-Docs, true to the auto-ethnographic form, I can only narrate what happened. Due to the strikes in the first year, then Covid in the second year, sadly these workshops were never held.

Conclusion

I hope through this reflection to have highlighted how the decolonising process my students and I started (and by no means finished) with the module *Documentary, Reality TV and Real Lives* speaks to Dennis's tenets of decolonising the curriculum. In the reflection above I have spoken less to Dennis's final two points, which I will focus on in this conclusion:

1. Explore and identify the political implications of specific pedagogical approaches [...]
2. Extricate your curriculum from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people and use the resources of imagination, organising, opposition and resistance in pursuance of that end, pausing only when it is accomplished.

(Dennis, 2018, p. 202)

Working through this process certainly highlighted to me that one can become so focused on decolonising the curriculum that pedagogy becomes an afterthought. In writing this reflection, I initially thought I had entirely disregarded pedagogy, but as a teacher with 13-years' experience when I embarked on this process, it is no surprise perhaps that I was thinking about pedagogy without necessarily realising I was thinking about it. This highlights, to me, the importance of regular reflective practice. Regularly writing about our teaching, something that we are rarely encouraged to do after initial teacher-training, enables us to really understand not only what we do in the class, but how and why we do it. It enables us to improve our approaches by listening to ourselves – as important subjects within the classroom, and the feedback of our other co-learners as exemplified in my reflections shared about consciously changing my role in the classroom between the two iterations of teaching this module.

In the reflective process that underpins this article, two further criticisms were raised for me. The first, that despite engaging in a decolonising process, my reading list was still predominantly informed by white scholars. As recognised earlier in this article, diversifying one's reading list is not decolonising work in itself and can be perceived as tokenistic. Diversifying one's reading list of course still has its benefits. Nevertheless, I would caution that just because there is a range of global scholars on one's reading list, this does not automatically mean the articles and books offer a broad spectrum of alternative approaches. The dominance of European modes of knowledge productions has spread widely and is particularly prevalent in Anglophone academic writing, wherever it is written. We must also acknowledge that whatever our background, once we have entered the university system, gained our PhD and started to develop an academic career, we share a privileged educational status distinct from the majority of the population in whatever nation we live. To avoid tokenism, we should also try to avoid only selecting authors of colour, whose work is about decolonisation and yet including a diversity of topics by white authors. This is certainly a challenge I faced in developing my own reading lists and an area I could yet do better in.

The second criticism for me was whether I was still creating a canon for students. Whilst I was moving away from the most famous British and American documentaries that I had been introduced to in my own studies, there was certainly a French-leaning influence in my filmography, and I selected several well-known works that would populate most left-leaning documentary courses today. I realised in writing this reflection that *Galsen* and *Colours of the Alphabet* were the only lesser-known documentaries on my screening list. I may have encouraged a criticism for a particular political shaping of pedagogy and curriculum, but I had perhaps foregrounded another. Can decolonising work ever be apolitical though? Unlikely. Nevertheless, we should always reflect on what politics we might be expressing in our classrooms and how we can create a learning space that allows every learner to have a voice, even if we might personally or professionally

disagree with it. Without this, we replace one singularity with another, rather than opening up to pluraversality.

Engaging in the beginnings of this decolonising process brought unexpected lessons to the fore for both me and the students. Firstly, it raised an important issue about availability and accessibility of sources which has become a more serious issue the more dependent Higher Education institutions have become on streaming services like Kanopy and Netflix. Such services are regionally locked, offering different content in different nations, and regularly change their offerings. Furthermore, they tend to offer incomplete subtitling to language not recognised as ‘proper speech’. Films considered artworks rather than commercial products, for example the films of Akomfrah, are not easily available outside of galleries (that may or may not be screening them when your module runs and even if they are, it may not be practical to get there). Where they are available, it is often on platforms like YouTube with inaccurate, AI-generated subtitling. Online platforms are unstable teaching depositories – you cannot guarantee a film you have on your screening list will be available come the week you want students to watch it and even if it is, it may not be fully accessible.

Furthermore, reliance on such platforms seriously hampers our ability, as educators and co-learners, to extricate our curriculum from existing power structures. Particularly since the Covid Pandemic, there has been a push at my institution to ensuring all films on a module screening list are available online so that students can access them at any time, anywhere. Nevertheless, this notion that online access is somehow assured is illusionary. It also encourages solo viewing rather than group screenings, the latter offering critical context and conversation about films immediately before and after it is viewed, which speaks to the multiplicity of knowledges so important to decolonising. It was obvious both in my own attempts to widen the filmography for the module and in the students’ research projects that it was difficult to watch some of the films that seemed relevant to our learning, either due to language barriers and a lack of or problematic subtitling or due to them being prohibitively expensive to buy as DVDs (or only available on 35mm or 16mm) or totally unavailable online in the UK. Through our co-learning, both the students and I came to recognise how libraries, universities, streaming services and archives remain gatekeepers (re)producing restricted knowledges as well as highlighting the limitations of apparently transnational distribution systems (emphasising that we do not have the ease of access we sometimes presume the internet offers). This was not only true of institutions in the West, but also of platforms like AfroDocs, which raised questions about how much of a right we have to access other knowledges. Our learning on the module, then, came to be about more than what we see in any documentary, and we became very aware of the infrastructures affecting what we come to know through this form.

I want to finish this conclusion with a reflection on the political implications of decolonising a documentary module with a series of questions that I hope will inform both my future practice and that of readers:

- Is documentary studies simply about teaching students what is documentary and how it functions within society and cultures, or can we do more with it?
- What would a module filmography look like if composed only of films by filmmakers with little prestige: those marginalised both artistically and commercially? If we are really dedicated to decolonising, do we have a responsibility as educators to make their work more visible?
- Whose voices matter and why? How can we develop coherent curricula from a diverse range of experiences and knowledges without reverting to tokenism?
- How might we develop activist curricula and pedagogies in which staff and students play an equal role?
- What role should we take up in this process, as faculty?
- What existing structures within and beyond the university need to be resisted and agitated to allow this change?
- And, perhaps most importantly, to what extent can we work creatively within our existing limitations to start doing this work together?

References

- Arshad, M., Dada R., Elliott, C., Kalinowska, I., Khan, M., Lipiński, R., Vassanth, V., Bhandal, J., de Quinto Schneider, M., Georgis, I., Shipston, F. (2021) 'Diversity or Decolonization? Searching for the tools to dismantle the "master's house"', *London Review of Education* 19(1), 1–18.
- Bâ, S.M. and Higbee, W. (eds) (2012) *De-Westernizing Film Studies*. Routledge.
- Bazin, A. (1971) The Ontology of the Photographic Image. In *What Is Cinema?* (pp. 9–16). University of California Press.
- Bergala, A. (2016) *The Cinema Hypothesis: Teaching Cinema in the Classroom and Beyond*. Trans. By Madeline Whittle. Wien: SYNEMA – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien.
- Bhambra, G. K., Gebrial, D., and Nişancıoğlu, K. (2018) Introduction: Decolonising the University?. In G.K. Bhambra, D. Gebrial, and K. Nişancıoğlu (eds), *Decolonising the University* (pp. 1–18). Pluto Press.
- Bruzzi, S. (2000) *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge.
- Chambers, J. (2018) 'Towards an open cinema: Revisiting Alain Bergala's *The Cinema Hypothesis* within a global field of film education'. *Film Education Journal*, 1(1): 35.50.
- Cowie, E. (1999) The Spectacle of Actuality. In J.M. Gaines and M. Renov (eds), *Collecting Visible Evidence* (pp. 19–45). University of Minnesota Press.
- Czenave, J. (2018) 'Earth as Archive: Reframing Memory and Mourning in *The Missing Picture*', *Cinema Journal* 57(2): 44– 65.

- Dennis, C. A. (2018) Decolonising Education: A Pedagogic Intervention. In G.K. Bhabra, D. Gebrial, and K. Nişancıoğlu (eds), *Decolonising the University* (pp. 190–207). Pluto Press.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2003) *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*. MIT Press.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.
- Holt, N.L. (2001) 'Beyond Technical Reflection: Demonstrating the Modification of Teaching Behaviors using Three Levels of Reflection', *Avante* 7(2), 66–76.
- Holt, N.L. (2003) 'Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2(1), 18–28.
- Honess Roe, A. (2013) 'Representation Strategies'. In *Animated Documentary*. Palgrave Macmillan, 17–40.
- Galmard, E (2018) 'The Interpellator, The Body–Archive, and The Spectral Observer: Uses of the Archives in Rithy Panh's S21 Trilogy', *Plaridel* 15(1): 15–28.
- Gopal, P (2021) 'On Decolonising and the University', *Textual Practice* 29.5.21.
- Lê, Viêt (2014) 'What Remains: Returns, Representation, and Traumatic Memory in S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine and Refugee', *American Quarterly* 66(2): 301–32.
- Marks, L. (2000) *Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses*. Duke University Press.
- Matthews, S. (2021) 'Decolonising while white: confronting race in a South African classroom', *Teaching in Higher Education*, online pre-print, 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1914571>
- Mignolo, W.B. and Walsh, C.E. (2018) *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press.
- Nichols, B. (2001) 'How did Documentary Filmmaking get Started?' and 'What Types of Documentary are there?' In *Introduction to Documentary* (pp. 82–138). Indiana University Press.
- Nichols, B. (2008) The Question of Evidence, the Power of Rhetoric and Documentary Film. In T. Austin and W. de Jong (eds.) *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices* (pp. 29–38). McGraw–Hill Education,
- Rony, F. T. (1996) *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Duke University Press.
- Rony, F. T. (2006) 'The Photogenic Cannot be Tamed: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's *Trance and Dance in Bali*', *Discourse* 28(1), 5–27.
- Rothberg, M. (2019) *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford University Press.
- Shohat, E. and Stam R. (1994) *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*. Routledge.
- Sparkes, A.C. (1996) The Fatal Flaw: A Narrative of the Fragile Body–Self, *Qualitative Inquiry* 2(4), 463–94.
- Stone, R.V. and Ahston, S. (2021) 'How not to decolonise your curriculum', *Wonkhe Blog*, available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-not-to-decolonise-your-curriculum/>

- Tuck, E & Yang, K. W. (2012) 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1–40.
- wa Thiong'o, N. (1986) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Pearson Education Ltd.
- Wall, S. (2008) 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 7(1), 38–53.
- Willis, Emma (2014) "Here was the place": (Re)Performing Khmer Rouge Archives of Violence. In *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship: Absent Others* (pp. 129–60). Palgrave Macmillan.