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INDUSTRY NEWS

The new reality of documentary

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Screen Hub

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Next week's Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) in Fremantle includes a panel session called *Defining Documentary*. A timely topic, given the genre-challenging documentaries soon to be screened by the public broadcasters, with Government finance. In this two-part article, Kaye Blum checks out the new spin on 'reality' in documentary.

Have you heard of 'experiential history'? How about 'living history' or 'historical reality'? 'Docu-soaps' have been around for a while. But what is a 'formatted documentary'? Does the somewhat oxymoronic term 'reality documentary' send a chill down the spine? These are just a few of the new labels making appearances lately.

Just last week, Hilton Cordell Productions announced details of a forthcoming documentary history series which starts pre-production in April. Called *The Colony*, it takes a group of Australian, English and Irish families back in time to spend four months living as their settlement ancestors did, in a New South Wales colony during the early 1800s.

Producer Chris Hilton describes *The Colony* as 'an experiential history series'. It has pre-sales with SBS, RTE Ireland and the History Channel UK; with finance from the NSW Film and Television Office and the Film Finance Corporation (FFC).

Hold your horses – the FFC doesn't invest in reality TV, does it? Here's what the current guidelines say: 'The FFC invests in documentaries which have an Australian free-to-air television presale. It does not invest in other actuality programs, such as reality television, infotainment, current affairs, cooking, how-to or sports programs.'

So is *The Colony* reality TV or documentary? It's bizarrely similar in format to the Australian version of the American series *Frontier House*, give or take 50 years. To be screened on the ABC this year, the Australian series, *1860s House* is described as 'a living experiment with people taking on the roles of the family, servants and station hands of an authentic squatter's house of the 1860s'. Participants will spend three months living in a world designed to be a recreation of outback Australia.

No doubt, both these 'living history' series will provide historical insight and cultural relevance to viewers. They both employ traditional observational documentary techniques. But doesn't contriving a scenario to watch how 'real' people will cope have a slight hint of *Big Brother* or *Survivor* about it?

Once upon a time, documentary generally indicated an element of truth. While there were variations between Dziga Vertov's 'Kino Pravda', the French 'Cinéma Vérité', the American/Canadian 'Direct Cinema' and the British Observational Documentary, they all shared a common goal of filming reality – real people within their real environment – with as little interference from filmmakers as possible.

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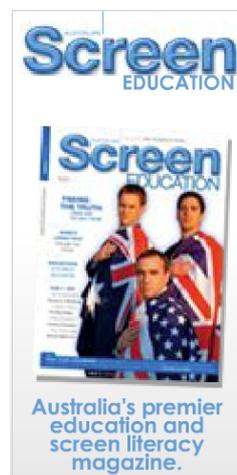
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These days, the term ‘reality’ implies something else altogether. Reality TV observes ‘real’ people, but places them in unreal circumstances – contrived scenarios. And the characters compete for a prize: a million bucks, a new restaurant, a new house, or even a new spouse.

So there are no prizes up for grabs in *The Colony* or *1860s House*. But both series clearly borrow from reality TV formats by using contrived scenarios. So which genre do these new series fall under?

In January, press articles in *The Sunday Times*, *The Age* and *The Australian* placed *1860s House* under the reality TV category rather than documentary. Audiences will most likely do the same – for *The Colony* as well.

Not so long ago, ‘reality TV’ was a dirty word (or term) amongst the documentary community. It was considered light entertainment and had very little relevance to the term ‘reality’. But now we have the public broadcasters jumping on the bandwagon, with support from Government funding agencies. Obviously, there is an urgent need to re-define the boundaries of ‘documentary’.

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