

Documentaries can  
never present  
anything but one man  
or woman's selective  
version...



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Dennis O'Rourke's 'Cunnamulla' is no exception to this statement. This social documentary shows the everyday lives of a select group of local residents within Cunnamulla, most of whom are 'misfits' in the community. By showing only these people O'Rourke has developed the perception that in this small town there is no future prospects for youth, an overwhelming amount of gossip and strongly defined social boundaries, many which are defined by race.

He also portrays the local residents as being crude and uncultured. O'Rourke uses many different techniques in order to achieve his perception of Cunnamulla. The opening scene at the sheep dip immediately sets up the town's rural basis. Without the use of a narrator to explain what is happening, shots such as this have to be used in order to explain to the viewer what is going on. There is also very little music used in this documentary to persuade the viewer how to perceive what they are watching.

In order to overcome the lack of these aspects throughout the documentary, the content and order in which certain scenes are shown is of great importance. The majority of the film is shot using close medium shots and medium close ups. This use of close framing gives the viewer a more personal attachment with the people being interviewed. The personal attachment with these people is what ultimately draws the viewer in, thus making it easier for the documentalist to persuade us into believing his version of reality.

The use of several long shots in between the interviews gives the viewer a sense of isolation. It also helps give us the feeling that nothing is going on in the town, as most of the long shots shown throughout the documentary are of people lazily sitting around. The technique of using very formal music both in the beginning and ending scenes is of stark contrast to the message which is being portrayed. This contrast of music with the footage shown helps exemplify the documentarists version of reality. The places shown in Cunnamulla are all chosen for a particular reason.

Most of the places shown are run down and desolate. Herb, the local scrap metal merchants backyard is a prime example of this. At Herbs place the viewer is shown large amounts of scrap metal lying around, numerous dogs kept in cages and an old sign on the front fence stating his business. The run down and disordered state of Herbs backyard shows the viewer that he has a lack of pride for both house and the state in which he lives. The shot of the end of the railway track helps emphasize the isolation which is present in Cunnamulla.

It is also given a very different meaning by Neredah, Arthurs wife, to describe the type of people which are living in Cunnamulla. " My father told me never to marry anyone from the end of the railway line - they just jump off here and you don't know where they've come from," she says. The statement of how her father disliked the idea of her living at the end of a railway line also shows the unwillingness of people to move to such an area. The whole documentary consists of a series of confronting interviews with residents of Cunnamulla.

Although the entire documentary consists of interviews, O'Rourke's voice is rarely heard. After several months of living in the town O'Rourke had interviewed the mayor, schoolteachers, the priest, and other 'official' representatives. When editing his material however he gravitated toward those who could be described as outsiders - two sexually active teenage girls, a young Aboriginal man about to go to prison, the dog catcher/morgue worker, the local scrap metal merchant and a cab driver and his wife.

To persuade the audience to see Cunnamulla as having no prospects in way of success for the residents, O'Rourke primarily showed only these community 'misfits', of whom the documentary principally revolved around. The interviews taken with these select people consisted of excessive coarse language, controversial topics and their general discontent with the town's present and future prospects. The excessive coarse language used helps to emphasize the documentalist's perception of the local residents being crude and uncultured.

Many of the interviews consisted of people talking about break and enters and residents of Cunnamulla going to jail. By having these topics brought up on several occasions the viewer starts to conceive that these occurrences are not uncommon. This adds to the image that the future prospects for the youth of Cunnamulla are bleak. One controversial issue brought up by Arthur, the local taxi driver, is about how he believes there to be incest occurring throughout the town. Arthur strongly believes that 'behind closed doors' some local residents are having sexual relationships with members of their family.

The documentalist added this in to convey to the viewer that the residents in this small town were unrefined and had a lack of morals. The most controversial topic brought up in this documentary is to do with the 13-year-old and 15-year-old girls, Cara and Kellie-Ann. O'Rourke has been attacked in print and is currently fighting a legal battle for his use of the girls' confessions on their sexual adventures. By using this footage though he showed both the crude nature of the townsfolk and the way in which, in his opinion, the youth of Cunnamulla live their daily lives.

Although he decided to show these negative images O'Rourke failed to show the footage of the girls in the Miss Princess competition. Cara and Kellie-Annes involvement in the Miss princess competition is supposedly why he chose to use them in this documentary. By omitting the positive image of the teenage girls participating in this competition O'Rourke has failed to show a balanced representation of both Cara and Kellie-Anne. When other residents outside of his select group were shown they were shown whilst lazing around and, in the case of some residents, indulging in alcoholic beverages.

What O'Rourke failed to do was show any of the local small businesses or interview any of the small business owners. This lack of a balanced overview of Cunnamulla proves the bias that O'Rourke undoubtedly had whilst shooting this documentary. On one occasion O'Rourke did choose to show a local resident carrying out his work. This however happened to be when Ringer, the local dog catcher, had to put down a dog. The scene showed Ringer take a dog out to the side of a dirt road and eradicate it with a shotgun. This emotive image helped the viewer perceive the harshness of life in a small town.

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The documentalist did not present a representative account of life in Cunnamulla. He did not show successful citizens such as the mayor, schoolteachers, the priest, and local business owners. Neither did he show the 'good side' of the people who he did interview, such as Kellie-Anne and Cara. Instead he chose to show select images of fringe personalities, people of whom would stand at the lower end of the social ladder within the community. Through omitting positive images, Dennis O'Rourke has showed only his selective version of Cunnamulla.