

Graduation 2006 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Nick Broomfield
Orator: Dr Jeffrey Geiger

Chancellor, the Senate of the University has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon NICK BROOMFIELD

Nick Broomfield is one of Britain's most important documentary film makers. The films he has made over the last 30 years have spanned several continents, and dealt with an incredible range of issues. In *Behind the rent strike* he documented rent strikes and abysmal living conditions in Liverpool. In films like *Kurt and Courtney*, and *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*, he revealed the pitfalls of Hollywood fame and notoriety. In *The Leader, His Driver and His Driver's Wife* and its recent follow-up *His Big White Self* he examined ongoing racism and neo-Nazism in the Afrikaner Resistance Movement of South Africa. Even a cursory glance at these films makes it clear that Nick Broomfield has rarely played it safe. And, as reflects the work of an investigative reporter who is always taking risks, critics have rarely been able to formulate a unified opinion of his work. In the press Nick Broomfield has variously been described as a maverick director, as daring, enticing, controversial, hilarious, scintillating, notoriously abrasive, audacious, dedicated, and as politically astute. Probably somewhere amidst this sea of praise and blame is a kernel of truth: a documentary filmmaker whose work does not always make for comfortable viewing, capturing as it does the strangeness, and the unpredictability, the violence and subtle frustrations of everyday life. Nick Broomfield is a director whose dedication to using film as a medium for truth-telling has led him, no doubt, down many blind alleys, but also towards extraordinary revelations about the world we live in.

His films tend to be the work of an investigator and provocateur, who places himself at the forefront of the action, and the result is a signature style that has made him a celebrity in his own right. Like only a handful of documentary filmmakers today, he is instantly recognisable: a familiar presence on screen, usually holding the sound boom while in pursuit of a sceptical or outright resistant interviewee. This practice came about as the result of a now-widely cited moment in 1988 while making *Driving Me Crazy*, when he decided that putting his own presence up front in the film could help make sense of the disordered events taking place before the camera. Traditionally, all but the most radical documentary filmmakers tended to hide their presence editing themselves out of the action so as to preserve the illusion of narrative coherence and realism. Nick Broomfield wanted his films instead to reflect - rather than erase the often messy filmmaking process - so he began to leave in the documentary footage of the confused meetings, disagreements, failed interviews and dead-ends that inevitably form the task of filmmaking. This change of direction led to a new freedom away from the confines of what has come to be known as observational cinema, and it would result in the innovative and investigative modes with which he is now closely associated.

Nick Broomfield is here today not only because of his many achievements in film, but because he has a substantial connection to the University of Essex. He studied Politics here, and around the same time he made a short film called *Who Cares?*, about a threatened working class community in Liverpool. Although produced on almost no budget and quite different in style from his later works, even this early piece reflects his strong personal investment in the people he films. After Essex, he took up filmmaking as a vocation, seeking a more hands-on route to communicate public and social issues. He was one of the first cohort of students at The National Film School, as it was known then, an institution that has become amongst the most prestigious in the world, producing documentary filmmakers like Kim Longinotto and Molly Dineen, as well as directors like Mike

Radford, Lynn Ramsay, Nick Park, Terence Davies and many other well-known figures in the film industry.

Colin Young was the Film School's founder and he, then, was the chair of the Department of Theater Arts at the University of California Los Angeles; and Young had an enormous influence and inspired great affection among young filmmakers over the years - Nick Broomfield was no exception. Film School was also where he encountered Joan Churchill, herself a highly regarded director and cinematographer, and their meeting would lead to award-winning collaborations on a number of films. While at National Film School, Nick made *Proud to Be British* (1973), in which the inhabitants of Beaconsfield, where the Film School is located, speak out on what they think Britishness means and at the same time reveal the pervasiveness of class-consciousness, racism and nationalism. Prefiguring many controversies to come, the Buckinghamshire Advertiser disapprovingly reviewed the film as the product of "a left-wing, pro-comprehensive school atheist."

Behind the Rent Strike was made as his graduation film the following year and established a career that would lead to numerous awards and honours: the Sundance Festival First Prize, the Amnesty International Doen Award for *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, First Prizes at festivals like Chicago, Mannheim, and Popoli; the Dupont Columbia Award for Outstanding Journalism for the film *Tattooed Tears*, the Robert Flaherty Documentary Award, the Hague Peace Prize, the Chris Award at the Columbus International Film and Video Festival, and a British Academy Award for the film *Soldier Girls*.

In Nick Broomfield's work you can trace the influence of some of the most daring and innovative practitioners in documentary film history. These include the French director Jean Rouch, who developed a manifesto for a self-aware and audience-centred mode of filmmaking that he called *cinéma vérité*, or film truth; also British documentarist John Grierson's commitment to using cinema as a method for showing social problems to wider audiences; also D. A. Pennebaker's irreverent and penetrating glimpses into the messy world of celebrity culture. The All Movie Guide notes that his "overt technique of courting controversy and his choice of offbeat material has made Nick Broomfield an important voice in reshaping the style and content of documentary today."

But I think the uniqueness of his work goes even further. Like the American filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, Nick Broomfield has always had a knack for revealing the hypocrisies that lurk beneath many social and governmental institutions, but to this he has added a dash of black humour and a more directly confrontational, interventionist stance. This is evident as early as 1975 in the film *Juvenile Liaison*, which follows the harsh police treatment of children accused of minor offences. The film ended up at the centre of a censorship controversy when the BFI withdrew it from distribution after pressure from the police, and refused to allow it to be shown on television.

Many of his films, like *Biggie and Tupac* (2002) which investigates the relationship between the murders of rap superstars Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls (aka the Notorious BIG), take the shape of a journey or quest, and use the camera as way of peeling back the layers of what's visible to us, as consumers of celebrity images, they reveal the truths hidden behind the media glare. There are moving images that linger in the memory like 1982's *Tattooed Tears*, a disturbing look at incarcerated young people in Los Angeles, which shows a dehumanizing penal system that crushes the hopes of teenagers who often were involved in merely minor offences. There are also intense scenes that mix comedy and danger, as when in *Biggie and Tupac* he insists on visiting the rap mogul Marion "Suge" Knight of Death Row in a high security prison, leaving his cameraperson in such obvious terror that he is nearly unable to film. At a recent screening of that film in Essex, the scene left one person nearly shouting at the screen, "Don't do it Nick, he's crazy!"

This is typical of the emotion that Nick Broomfield's work can conjure up. Though he's been compared to other filmmakers, many of whom actually followed in his footsteps, one comparison I've rarely heard is to the great German documentary and fiction film director Werner Herzog. Both

men's films show that real life occurs in the margins, in the details, and communicate a commitment and passion that their directors have for filmmaking, amidst a sense that chaos is always waiting in the wings. Herzog has said, "Filmmaking is my duty, because [the films] might be the inner chronicle of what we are, and we have to articulate ourselves. Otherwise we would be cows in the field." Herzog has also said, "I would travel down to Hell and wrestle a film away from the devil if it was necessary." These are words that perhaps might have been spoken by Nick Broomfield himself.

Chancellor, I present to you NICK BROOMFIELD.