

On the Outside: film-making as story-telling through introspective re-enactment, and the significance of anonymity in the spoken word.

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Abstract

On the Outside (Gray, 2019), is a 42 minute film that is the outcome of a participatory film project involving women serving sentences in HM Prison Polmont, Scotland. Scripts were developed that communicated the women's stories using their exact spoken words and four individual narratives were recounted by four actors, giving introspective accounts of the women's lives, while challenging preconceived notions of the label 'prisoner'.

Representations of the criminal justice system within film and television are a highly visible presence on current mainstream platforms, in both documentary and dramatic forms. Delineations between fiction and non-fiction narrative are increasingly exercised by film-makers to affect audience expectations, in particular when exploring dramatisations of 'true life' crimes. *On the Outside* is a project led by Paul Gray, whose practice led research explores the dynamics of such delineations through collaboration with the participants, in their roles as authors of their own narratives.

This paper recounts the processes involved in the realisation of the project, which will be discussed in relation to verbatim practices, as well as the underlying methodology used to action participatory video techniques. The aim was to facilitate a production process that best suited the specific voices of those involved, while also recognising the parameters in which the project was undertaken – in this case, the significance of anonymity in storytelling, when collaborating with vulnerable individuals and communities.

Introduction

On the Outside (Gray, 2019), is a 42 minute film that is the outcome of a participatory film project involving women who were serving sentences in HM Prison and Young Offenders Institution (YOI) Polmont, Scotland. Seminars and discussions were held

inside the prison that explored story-telling through the medium of film, where scripts were developed that give an account of four women's stories using their exact spoken words, based on recordings made during the project. Their individual narratives were recounted by four actors, with the purpose of challenging preconceived notions of the label 'prisoner'.

Representations of the criminal justice system within film and television are a highly visible presence on current mainstream platforms, in both documentary and dramatic forms, where delineations between fiction and non-fiction narrative are increasingly exercised by film-makers to affect audience expectations, in particular when exploring dramatisations of 'true life' scenarios. The popularity of the subject matter is illustrated by BBC iPlayer's inclusion of a category that is dedicated to 'Crime & Justice', including series such as *Unsolved*, where the episode *The boy who disappeared* (Harte and Munro, 2016) cuts contemporary reconstruction footage (filmed in black and white) with existing CCTV black and white footage, within a single continuity edit. In cinema, high production values more associated with drama are used in documentaries such as *The Imposter* (Layton 2012), where voiceover accounts play over reconstructed events that may or may not be true, using a mode of address similar to the re-enactments that proved challenging for contemporary audiences (Williams, 1993, 12) of Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). Video on demand platform Netflix, champion the crime and justice subject matter in both documentary and drama. This includes documentary series *Making a Murderer* (2015), where directors Demons and Ricciardi forcefully call the narrative shots (Williams, 1993, 12) during an extended episodic form derived from drama, and the drama series

*Mindhunter*¹ (Penhall, 2017), that loosely reconstructs interviews of historical recordings with notorious criminals, in an approach that re-appropriates a reconstruction mode of address from documentary, back in to a semi-fictional, semi-factual narrative. By creatively exercising such delineations of representational norms, film-makers acknowledge that audiences, to some extent, must be accepting and knowledgeable of the blurring that is taking place between factual and fictional representations (Brooks, 2010).

On the surface, a more direct representation of first-hand narrated experience of the criminal justice system is offered in the television drama *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan 2013), which is based on the memoirs of Piper Kerman's time spent in prison for money laundering and drug trafficking. Schwan (2016, 481) highlights that through the fictional character Piper Chapman, the series "explicitly explores questions of representation and the ethics involved in mediating the stories of the incarcerated. Piper Kerman, as author of her memoir and executive consultant for the show, was not only responsible for mediating her own story but also those of the women around her." In doing so Schwan argues that by referencing Kerman's memoir within filmic tropes of

¹ For further discussion on the *Mindhunter* series' play with fact and fiction, and its public appeal, see articles:

Seymour, Tom. 2019. *The real Mindhunters: why 'serial killer whisperers' do more harm than good*. The Guardian, August 19. Accessed January 27, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/19/the-real-mindhunters-why-serial-killer-whisperers-do-more-harm-than-good>

Heritage, Stuart. 2020. *Thrill kill: should Netflix cancel David Fincher's Mindhunter?*. The Guardian, August 17. Accessed January 27, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jan/17/mindhunter-netflix-david-fincher-drama>

female prisoner representations, *Orange Is the New Black* “implicitly examines Chapman/Kerman’s complicity in this act of storytelling” (2016, 481) and “must be read primarily as a self-conscious nod to generic convention and perceived audience expectation, rather than a desire for “authentic” representation of prison life.” (2016, 478)

In summarising the film-maker’s potential necessity for compromise when representing real events through dramatisation, Cox (2010) takes this further by suggesting that an audience is more complicit in the film-makers’ conceit:

“Drama enables you to heighten impact by investing your tale with cogent scripting, professional acting and gratifying narrative arc. You’ll claim your story conveys the underlying truth, yet you’ll have to change some of the actual facts to make your schema work. By the time you’ve finished, no one will know what’s real and what is not. Probably, you won’t go out of your way to tell them and they won’t really want to know.” (Cox, 2010)

The practice led research behind *On the Outside*, explores the dynamics of such delineations between retold first-hand experience and re-enactment through dramatic means. By collaborating with the participants (women serving prison sentences), in their role as authors of their own narratives and representation, the intention was to minimise the potential impact of the “schema” (Cox, 2010) of the film, when conveying the inherent truth of the stories told. The underlying methodology was to explore participatory video techniques that would result in a production process best suited to the specific circumstance of the participants, while also acknowledging the parameters in which the project was undertaken - in this case, the significance of anonymity in storytelling when collaborating with vulnerable individuals and communities.

Methodologies behind the approach to *On the Outside* are recognisable as practices from verbatim theatre. Verbatim theatre is highlighted as a ‘practice’ rather

than a 'genre' by Wake (2018,119), who suggests “[t]he practice of verbatim, or saying something “word for word”, lies at the heart of all theatre and is a feature of much contemporary performance in dance, film, television and beyond”.

Wake (2018, 119) uses Tom Holloway’s play, *Beyond the Neck* (2007) to define verbatim methodologies within a more broadly defined practice than simply where “dialogue derives from vernacular speech that has been recorded, transcribed, edited and repeated” from “identifiable local figures”, to a more open practice defined around a “reliance on interviews as the primary research tool; the consultation with, representation of, and performance for the local community”. This paper refers to Wake’s perspective on verbatim as a practice, to frame participatory film methodologies and storytelling as a means of introspective re-enactment, within a requirement for anonymity, when communicating the stories of the participants of *On the Outside*.

Verbatim practice can be found in film and television in many forms, such as Norris and Blythe’s musical feature film *London Road* (2015), adapted from the theatre production of the same name, and BBC4’s film adaptation (Roberts, 2015) of BBC Radio 4’s play (Roberts, 2011) *Black Roses : The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*, in which first-hand accounts from Sophie’s mother, performed by actor Julie Hesmondhalgh, are combined with Sophie’s story, represented through the poetry of Simon Armitage (2012).

This paper explores the practice of verbatim within film by reflecting on Barnard’s approaches to film practice within the award winning film *The Arbor* (2010) that “explores the life, work, and legacy of the playwright Andrea Dunbar” and “invites spectators to be more conscious of the fictional elements woven into documentary films’ through a verbatim practice” (University of Kent, 2014).

On the Outside is a collaboration between Edinburgh Napier University, the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and their education partner Fife College. While this is a long standing, tried and tested partnership, the process of negotiating the creative parameters of projects reliant upon access to prison communities, can be understandably guarded, in particular where expectations of outcomes include public scrutiny through screenings and media coverage. Equally relevant and more importantly, are concerns where an education programme has the potential to detrimentally impact upon the mental wellbeing of the participants. This paper will discuss the processes involved and challenges faced during the project, outlining how clearly defined working parameters, shaped the creative practices and final outcome. Influential film exemplars used during seminars will be used to explore notions of authorship and ownership and the impact the project had on the participants. The paper will conclude by considering the influence of the film director on a participatory project that aims to limit such influence, as well as the contradictory parameters of collaboration with participants, who author their own representation but who do so anonymously.

Origin of the project

Edinburgh Napier University's educational collaboration with the Scottish Prison Service and their education partner Fife College, was initiated over ten years ago by Anne Schwan², who developed a peer-learning placement scheme for undergraduate students at HMP Edinburgh's learning centre. The collaboration progressed from participatory practices using the written word, through practical photography courses and on to video-making projects, both undertaken at HMP and YOI Polmont. The move

² See: <https://www.napier.ac.uk/people/anne-schwan>

from written representations to a photographic depiction, created by and of participants, raised concerns regarding anonymity of the individuals (an institutional stipulation), consequently limiting engagement opportunities outside of the institution walls. This was easily remedied in photography by limiting the choice of subject matter to personal themes without the inclusion of individually identifiable content. Photography projects achieved success with public exhibitions such as the Koestler Trust's Awards Exhibition, showing in London's South Bank, 2018³. However, the video project offered less opportunity for anonymity, where participants appear in front of camera, therefore creating the potential for recognition by a public audience. The group included young offenders under the age of 18 years and the *Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995*, stipulates guidelines limiting public identification of children. While the Act refers to court proceedings, a cautionary approach extended to the anonymity of the participants.

The next development in the partnership was an educational participatory film project, where a group of women serving sentences at HMP Polmont were identified as potentially benefitting from creative arts opportunities. The initial proposal outlined a project undertaken in two parts. Part one involved a series of group seminars and individual sessions that explored storytelling through film, where all sessions were recorded and transcribed to aid the creative process. The intended final outcome of individual film scripts, written with and by each of the participants, would be used in part two to create short films by working with actors outside of the prison.

³ For more information on the Koestler Trust Awards, see: <https://www.koestlerarts.org.uk/exhibitions/annual-uk-exhibition/im-still-here/>

The brief had a working title of ‘Visual Letters’ and the description in the Partnership Agreement outlined the process:

“[W]orkshops will begin with screenings of short films or film scenes that will act as inspiration for the participants’ stories. While the stories can take any form that the participants choose, they will centre around the idea of a letter to somebody - a younger or older self, a friend, family member or fictional character. The purpose will be to empower participants as the authors of their own representations.

Workshops will be a combination of group work and 1:1 story discussions [that] can be tailored to suit a varying group size. The stories that will be developed can be a collective process or individual, so if participation is inconsistent from week to week, it will still be possible to continue with developing stories and characters. The stories will be used to create characters that will act as a starting point to develop the storyboards and scripts that will be used to make the short films.”

(Gray and Morgan, 2017)

Consideration was given to any requirement for self-reflection or evaluation that could have a detrimental effect on the mental wellbeing of the participants. The notion of communication with and a link to family, a ‘visual letter’, was viewed as a positive theme that was met with the least friction or possible negative impact. The phrase ‘authors of your own representation’ also met with the partners’ approval and while this can communicate awkwardly, with the potential of appearing patronising and overly dogmatic in tone, the premise clearly communicated the intention.

Participation was voluntary and involved a total of eight women throughout the duration of the project. The final outcome reflected the input of four participants who were able to contribute at the final stages. Of the other four, two younger participants’ interest waned following the first couple of seminars and they did not return (both were also in the process of moving to another prison); another was released before the project

concluded and did not want her work included⁴; and the fourth was highly engaged but was moved to another prison. Participants ranged in age from seventeen to mid-fifties and were serving sentences of between 18 and 30 months.

Process and timescale

Seminars were held weekly at HMP Polmont Learning Centre beginning in November 2017 and ending in February 2018. The seminars were attended by project producer Nasreen Saraei and director Paul Gray, and were facilitated by a SPS tutor who also attended on occasion. Seminars were followed by one-to-one sessions with Gray, to elaborate on ideas and reflect upon the transcribed conversations from previous sessions.

The final film is based on the scripts that were constructed from the audio recordings of the seminars and discussions, which recount four women's stories that are told in their exact spoken words, including song and poetry. The stories retold by four actors, explore the women's life experiences – including family life, drug abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, and their experience of being incarcerated – as well as their hopes for the future and the relationships and bonds that formed between them.

The initial intended audience for *On the Outside* was the participants, offering back a “representation of, and performance for the local community” (Wake, 2018, 201), therefore it was important for the women to recognise themselves in the work. To that end, the actors' delivery of dialogue is sympathetic to each individual's nuanced patterns of speech. The actors listened to recordings of the participants to undertake, in

⁴ The participant had written a poem that reflected upon being incarcerated in dark light, under the same sky as her family, which was now only visible to her between the bars of her small cell window.

part, a literal re-enactment of their voices. With the first-hand accounts being retold by actors, concerns around anonymity are negated, allowing for the film to be disseminated to a wider public audience, for which the participants, as authors, gave approval.

Performance - participants and actors

The role of the actors in *On the Outside* is clearly and tangibly defined. The actors use their skills to perform their ‘character’, as defined by the script, and are also guided by the audio recordings of the individuals they are playing.

However, the participants’ environment and circumstance, has influence over their decision to take part, creating the potential for the participants to have to ‘perform’ to an externally defined ‘role’. Participation was voluntary, with the project open to ‘all’, but participants were initially ‘shortlisted’ as being the most likely to engage or benefit from the project. This is not a criticism of the processes but highlights that the ‘community’ represented in the film is constructed via selection rather than a truly self-selecting or voluntary process. The participants engage with the project within a system where compliance is viewed positively, as alluded to in the Parole Board document, *A guide to help with your Parole Review, Information for prisoners* (2015), where guidance for writing a supportive representation for Parole Board, suggests:

“Write down the good things you have done in prison. This could be courses you have done, things that show you can be trusted and that you have behaved well.”
(Parole Board, 2015, 16)

Volunteering for activities, where being seen, or heard, to be doing or saying the right things – to perform - and taking opportunities to do so, carries a significant incentive and potential benefit. Clearly the benefits of engagement with learning in general are far broader in reach, as summarised in Piché and Walby’s (2018) editorial

preface to the *Starting with Prisoners' Standpoints, Following with Action* edition of *The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*:

“The authors in this issue repeatedly illustrate that the facilitation, teaching, reading groups, and correspondence undertaken by multiple Convict Criminology groups and others [...] help bridge the divide between the inside and outside in ways that reaffirm the humanity and commitment learners share with one another.” (Piché and Walby, 2018, 2)

Sharing was a central theme in *On the Outside*, where engagement was incentivised not only by the opportunity to learn but equally by the opportunity for social engagement, resulting in the participants' creating a collective narrative for the film rather than individually, as was in the initial proposal.

Verbatim as practice

In offering a definition of verbatim as a 'practice' as opposed to a 'genre', Wake (2018) questions Holloway's assertion that his play *Beyond the Neck* (2007) should not be considered verbatim theatre. *Beyond the Neck* “responds to, though it does not represent” (Wake, 2018, 106) Australia's Port Arthur Massacre of 1996, where a single gun man was responsible for the death of 35 people and wounded 23 others (Britannica, 2019). Stephens article in The Sydney Morning Herald (March 2, 2012), describes how Holloway constructed four monologues from interviews with multiple survivors, where Holloway “had many questions on his list. As he met and spoke with more people who had been at Port Arthur that terrible day, he grew quieter. Eventually, he was mostly silent during the interviews, listening attentively to these explorations of the darkness.”

In *Beyond the Neck*, Holloway works from dialogue that has been recorded in interviews, however he does not consider his approach to be within the 'genre' of verbatim theatre:

“Although moving, I sometimes struggle to see the ‘theatre’ in verbatim plays, as it is people talking about things that have already happened. Where are the characters’ journeys? Where is the drama?” (Wake, 2018, 101)

Wake (2018, 102) suggests that “there is much to be gained by embracing a definition of ‘verbatim’ as a practice, or series of practices”, rather than verbatim as a genre:

“*Beyond the Neck* might not be ‘pure verbatim’ in the sense that it is not immediately apparent that any of the dialogue derives from vernacular speech that has been recorded, transcribed, edited and repeated. Likewise, there are no identifiable local figures, only composite characters. However, the main features of verbatim are there: the reliance on interviews as the primary research tool; the consultation with, representation of, and performance for the local community; the resulting ‘bottom-up’ history; and, finally, the diegetic theatricality.” (p119)

In the first instance, *On the Outside* engages with verbatim as a ‘practice’ because it offers a creative solution to the circumstantial challenges of anonymity. While the question ‘where is the drama?’ was an inherent concern in defining a methodology, it was more straightforward identifying the characters’ journeys, constructed from the introspective self-reflection the participants share and that shifted over time – the recordings were made over a three month period. In *Beyond the Neck* (Holloway, 2007), “the action – whether mundane or murderous – is only ever described”, providing the audience “with the time and space to listen rather than watch” (Wake, 2018, 118). The spectacle and potential sensationalism of the actions that resulted in *On the Outside* participants being imprisoned, are retold rather than acted out, consequently they become less of a focus for the viewer. The emphasis shifts to the actors’ emotional resonance to the stories being told, rather than the actions being discussed - a diegetic theatricality recounted ‘word for word’ from the ‘recorded, transcribed, edited and repeated’ vernacular speech of the participants.

Wake's discussion of verbatim practice refers to "identifiable local figures" and "local community", both of which are central to Barnard's verbatim practice in *The Arbor* (2010):

[O]ne of the principal strategies pursued by Barnard involves the careful combination of audio interviews with the subjects of the film, with shots of the subjects played by actors, often situated in imaginary or remembered spaces (rather than the spaces in which the interviews took place). The film thereby fuses, through meticulous lip-synching, a documentary record of real persons recounting actual events with partly fictionalized visual representations. (University of Kent, 2014, 1)

Barnard "invites spectators to be more conscious of the fictional elements woven into documentary films" (UoK, 2014, 1), by placing the processes involved in making the film within the inherent fabric of the narrative structure and *mise-en-scène* of the film. The restaging of interviews in "imaginary or remembered spaces" is a dramatic and theatrical 'practice', that Wake (2018) argues falls within the beneficial broadening of the parameters of a verbatim practice.

In a review of *The Arbor* in the New York Times (April 26, 2011), Catsoulis describes Barnard's approach to lip-sync as "wrapping truth in a blanket of artifice" that produces "an effect that's at once aggressively theatrical and devastatingly intimate. Viewer and confidante become one as the actors recite their lines directly to the camera, their bodies positioned and lighted to form visual punctuation that pierces more deeply than any faithful re-enactment."

In an article titled Can 'fake' documentaries still tell the truth? (September 30, 2010), Brooks positions *The Arbor* as a documentary that "remind us that they are authored pieces of work as opposed to some objective, inviolate truth" and that *The Arbor* does this "to the point where we start to question the veracity of everything we

are seeing and hearing.” In an interview for the same article Bruzzi highlights *The Arbor* as one of “a crop of cinema releases that are all about the fluctuation between what's staged and what's real”, where “just because something is being performed doesn't automatically make it fake.”

In *On the Outside*, the participants’ stories are re-told by actors who perform within a dramatised scenario – a car journey. While not making use of lip syncing - a practice outwith the anonymity parameters of the project - or claiming to be a documentary record, *On the Outside* observes a methodology of representing “real persons recounting actual events with partly fictionalized visual representations”(UoK, 2014, 1), and although recounted anonymously, each of the four stories told are identifiably individual journeys. The notion of a character journey is further represented through the film unfolding during a single car journey that acts as a private space within a public environment - a reimagining of the education rooms (a safe space) within the prison, where the participants’ dialogues were recorded - embedding the processes of the research within the final artefact (the film), in effect rendering the film a document of the process of its own making.

Barnard describes the use of lip-sync in *The Arbor* as wanting “to maintain a sense of people speaking at one remove. Hopefully, it will remind the viewer that, however truthful a documentary attempts to be, it is always subject to the editorial decisions of the film-maker.” (The Guardian, April 12, 2010). In using the artifice of a dramatised intervention in *On the Outside* – the editorial decision to construct a car journey - the audience is ultimately asked to accept the integrity of the representation of what is said. The viewer then becomes complicit in the conceit of the film, which is encourage by deliberately placing the film’s context in a statement on the opening title sequence:

“Four stories from conversations with four women in prison.
Told in their own words, as authors of their own representation.
And retold by four actors.”

Seminar exemplars

Seminars explored story telling through, and approaches to, narrative form in film, with particular exemplars proving influential to the participants’ creative processes.

Danielson and Van Aertryck’s, *Hopptornet (Ten Meter Tower)* (2016) is a short film that documents people as they attempt to jump or dive from a ten-meter diving board for the first time. People at the top of the board go through the process of deciding whether to jump or walk back down the steps. It is as tensely humorous as it is meditative, with each mini drama encouraging the viewer to will the participants towards the edge and then off, down towards the pool below. Participants discussed how film can use an audience’s emotional connection and investment in a ‘characters’ portrayal as a narrative drive:

‘Gemma: See, the longer you stand on that board and think about it, I would not like, I’d just be standing talking myself out of it rather than talking myself in to it.
Vanessa: If I’ve no done it within the first 5 seconds, I’m no.
Gemma: If I was there, I’d have been like that woman, it was like, here fuck this, I’m off. It was quite funny [...] I really want to go swimming now.’⁵

Dypka’s film of Hollie McNish’s poem, *Embarrassed* (2016), was a particularly successful example of a short film directly impacting a participant’s work. In *Embarrassed*, McNish addresses the camera with a spoken word poem about why mothers feel forced to breast feed in public toilets. following the seminar, Gemma

⁵ This and all following dialogue by the participants is from transcriptions taken from the recordings of the seminars. The only changes are the names of the participants, where the pseudonyms from the film are used - Vanessa, Gemma, Abigail and Sandy.

returned to her cell in the evening and wrote a poem that explored her life experiences that led to imprisonment:

‘We got dubbed up at like half four yesterday, so I wrote it at five, and then it was done for half six cos I watched Hollyoaks... I just sat and read it and then I rolled myself a fag and watched the telly while I was thinking, [...] but I think from this you can kinda see why I’ve came to jail.’

The narrative within Gemma’s chapter of the film is built around the reading of her poem *My Freedom Has Gone* that takes structural inspiration from McNish’s use to repetition:

When you hear them keys rattle
you know it’s the start of a hard battle
When I had my own keys
locked my door as I pleased
it put my mind at ease
But now my freedom is gone
[...]
Bang goes the judge’s stick
two years I got in the nick
My mind just feels like a bulb that has blown
in complete darkness
don’t know whether I’m coming or going
My freedom is gone
[...]
And when I walk I will scream and shout
Fuck you jail and fuck your snout
And when I hear them keys rattle
I’ll say well done
You defeated the battle
My freedom is back.

(extract from Gemma’s poem *My Freedom has Gone*, 2017)

Gemma recited the poem to the other participants at a later seminar, where the resulting discussion forms part of the script, including Gemma's reason for writing the poem, while hinting at why she wanted to be part of the project:

SANDY

I thought it was fantastic.

ABIGAIL

That was well good man. I can, I can pure relate to that in some bits tae man.

ABIGAIL

I think a lot of folk could relate tae that.

VANESSA

Aye

GEMMA

What like?

ABIGAIL

Well obviously the shitty boyfriend, that is a complete arsehole, em, being controlled obviously. That you had a great life and that.

GEMMA

I know, it's jist it's easy I jist want to try and prove the point that it's so easy tae be done. Anyone can get themselves in tae that situation.

ABIGAIL

Mhmm, mhmm definitely.

GEMMA

It's scary, it's a scary place to be.

Some film examples demonstrated the potential for effective narrative construction within short form, others explored broader themes that sparked subject ideas. In a scene from Cianfrance's *Blue Valentine* (2010), Dean (played by Ryan Gosling) helps to move the belongings of an elderly man, Walter, to a care home. Dean unpacks the man's belongings, carefully putting them on display, including a collection of match books that he arranges on the wall of the room. The objects act as a brief insight in to the elderly Walter's life, which then informed the seminar discussions

around the significance of belongings, a theme highlighted in direct response to a participant's previous experience:

'I've just lost photographs, to be honest with you, [...] I had my flat for eight years and I lost it, eh, through rent arrears.[...] But I had all my belonging and aw that, see every single night I've been in here I'm going, aw I remember I've left that, aw I remember I've lost that, eight years worth of stuff I've lost.'⁶

Discussion following the scene from *Blue Valentine*, resonated with Vanessa, who shared details of a collection that had sentimental value to her:

'Ken sumthin [Do you know something], I used tae actually collect porcelain dolls, so I did. My Gran had hunners ae [hundreds of] them. Eh, but yeah I had hunners ae them as well. But my ex-partner smashed them all.

[...] My Gran started them, she got me one when I was younger. A wee angel sittin like that, wi the wee cross, eh, chain on her hand. That was my very first one. And fae then on I just loved them. And my mum would get me one at Christmas, my Gran would get me one.

I was meant tae get my Gran's porcelain dolls when she passed away as well, but I fell out wi ma Auntie so I didnae get them, and she was sortin all the stuff oot so, a bit messed up but...'

(from recording on 7 Feb 2018)

In the film, this introduces Vanessa's story before continuing on to the complexity of relationships between four generations of her family.

⁶ Taken from a conversation with a fifth participant who was moved to another prison half way through the project. Had she been able to continue her involvement, the film would have included five participants.

The Role of the film-makers – participants and the director

While films shown during the seminars reflect the director's⁷ specific references, they were also motivated by other creative parameters that were defined from the outset. For example, including recordings of the participants' actual voices was prohibited, as too were details of events or individuals that could identify those affected by the crimes committed.

In response to the project premise of participants' as authors of their own representation, part of the directorial approach was defined as shaping existing narratives rather than creating them, with the purpose of relinquishing influence over the stories communicated. However, the editing process drifted from the initial intention, where participants would be involvement in the final completion of the scripts as well as informing the film edit, which proved impractical in the timescale available. While this resulted in the 'directorial voice' influencing the edit to a greater extent than anticipated, it is important to consider the content of the texts being edited - the subjective conversations already pre-edited by the participants, in that they only shared the stories they wanted to tell. In effect they remained the first and most significant authors of their representation and editors of the film.

Similarly, time constraints impacted upon the decision to locate the narratives inside a car and within a notional journey, albeit a directorial decision made in response to final group discussions:

“ABIGAIL: I think we're all like quite different folk, cos I'm mair like, like my environments are like skate parks and things like that...

GEMMA: Make it mutual we can all just be in a park.

⁷ I will refer to my role as director in the third person. While examples discussed will reflect my personal interests, they are of relevance only in relation to the creative role of director.

VANESSA: Aye in a park aye that could work, just hinging out in a park

GEMMA: I'd probably be drivin about like, all my palls like we all just get, like everyone has cars, we all just get cars and just go on drives, and pull over sometimes...

VANESSA: Mhmm

ABIGAIL: Aye

GEMMA: [...] we always try to find like nice wee places [...] right by the sea [...] There's loads of nice back roads you can go and it's like... I think that's why maybe I feel so trapped in here cos I'm used to being so open and so free.

ABIGAIL: I'm used to being right beside the beach [...] Just usually go in cars and go on long drives...

VANESSA: [...] Somewhere that's no a city..."

(summarised dialogue from the final seminar, 7 Feb 18)

Both travel and being elsewhere were prevalent themes in the project. In response, the director's cinematic interests swayed the creative direction taken, for example, by referencing Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami's film *Ten* (2002), which is entirely set in a car and involves ten conversation between the female driver and predominantly female passengers (the exception being the driver's son). References to the societal notions of public and private space are clearly communicated through the use of the vehicle's restricted space, which creates opportunity for intimate conversation within a public environment. Equally influential was Kiarostami's *And Life Goes On* (1992) that tells the story of a film director returning to an Iranian village - the location of a previous Kiarostami film (1987) - a few days after it was hit by a devastating earthquake in 1990. *And Life Goes On* blurs the line between documentary reconstruction and fictional narrative, for which Kiarostami "rejected the 'emergency report' style, and went to exactly the opposite extreme from sensationalism", where he "resists any temptation towards voyeurism, and even any concessions to sentimentality" (Elena, 205, 94-95).

Recording seminars and one-to-one dialogues was central to the process of *On the Outside*, however the ‘process’ was not intended to be central to the film narrative, where the script developed into an edited account of our discussions. No words were added to the dialogue, other than to anonymise names and places, and although words were edited out, an undeniably narratively significant action, this was done within the parameters of the participants’ intentions. *On the Outside* dramatises truthfully recounted personal stories, where the process of script development was akin to a documentary film paper edit of transcribed interviews. However, aligning this dramatisation with a documentary vérité practice or attempting to pursue the notion of a documentary ‘truth’, are not the intention. If for *On the Outside*, a definition as one or other of documentary or drama is required, the process reflects a documentary practice, while the outcome is considered a drama - with all the potential trappings entailed when attempting to make the “schema work” (Cox, 2010) - with both parts combining in a verbatim practice that attempts to remain truthful to its intentions.

Williams (1993, 14) proposes the relationship between vérité practices and dramatisation in post-modern documentary as:

“Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths.”

Williams’ account shares similarities with Wake’s suggestion that a common feature in contemporary film-making is the “practice of verbatim, or saying something ‘word for word’”(2018, 119), where there is potential for the re-enactment and dramatising of “relative and contingent truths” (Williams, 1993, 14) that have been communicated through first person interviews.

In highlighting post-modern processes within documentary film-making that are concerned with the “contextualisation of the present with the past” (1993, 14), Williams proposes that the “recourse to talking-heads interviews, to people remembering the past, [is] an attempt to overturn this commitment to realistically record ‘life as it is’ in favor of a deeper investigation of how it became as it is.”(Williams, 1993, 15)

How life ‘became as it is’, is the position from which the participants tell their stories in *On the Outside*, albeit told from a singularly subjective voice. However, the circumstance of incarceration offers multiple influences on the voice of each participant. For example, the four participants were all nearing the end of their sentences and were approaching release by the end of the project. While all four participants appear to accept responsibility for their crimes, there are no alternative viewpoints offered and no claim on the film’s part to be objective. When participants share their stories, they do so devoid of sentimentality - at times speaking from an emotionally safe distance that is created by the passage of time - which affects the tone of conversation:

“I’d actually swore I’d never be back. It’s horrible. I hate the place, only good thing honestly about being in the jail is you can start to work with people, you can try tae deal wae things, find my ain voice, n depend on myself rather than depending on other people.”

Here Vanessa states the benefits of working with people, wanting to find her own voice and be self-dependent, phrases that ring of a learned narrative from counselling support. It is important then to regard the scripts – made from recordings covering a three month period - as a snap shot of where the women were at that moment in time, as further illustrated when Sandy reflects:

‘When the judge sentenced me, I was unsure how I should feel. I had got sentenced, I’d come to prison, then I had a day of complete heart break and pain’.

Sandy then comments upon how this changed over time:

‘I feel now, I’ve got the prison sentence and I’m gonna get on with it and I’m gonna be me, I’m not gonna change because I’m in prison. I’m gonna be positive, I’m gonna be nice, and I’m gonna be happy’.

When the individual narratives of the participants are considered as a whole, the viewer is given contradictory views. Two of the women state that they have benefited from prison, while another sees it as a “massive punishment”. There are also reflections that, for some who are less fortunate, prison can be seen within the parameters of a safe place to be. All views told from within the shared experience of incarceration.

Conclusion

In the final seminar, Gemma expressed her sense of achievement when stating “I wouldn’t have done it [writing] otherwise. I am pretty proud of it. I want to see this finished piece so badly. And say, I wrote that. That’s something.” Prior to a screening arranged for the participants, their families and other project stakeholders, Abigail wrote in an email, 19 August 2018, “Excited to see this all put together! I know it will be hard [watching the film] but it's an experience and I'm honoured that I got to be involved.” Of the four participants - all now released – three who have remained in contact expressed their approval and acceptance of the final film. In response to positive feedback following a screening at the London Literature Festival’s *Voices from Prison* event (2018)⁸, Abigail emailed on November 27, 2018, “It proves that we can make a difference and we can reach out and impact people's lives.”

⁸ See <https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whats-on/131389-voices-prison-2018>

The aim of the project was to facilitate a production process that best suited the specific voices of the participants involved, who through their incarceration, form a vulnerable community, where anonymity became a necessary strategy, chosen “from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths” (Williams, 1993, 14).

While the stories in *On the Outside* are very clearly voiced by individuals, the final authorship in the film remains incongruously anonymous. The participants’ names are replaced with pseudonyms and consequently, the credits state the film to be ‘written by Paul Gray and the 4 participants of *On the Outside*’. In offering participants the anonymity they required to share their stories without repercussion, it also effectively removes their authorship from their own representation. Paradoxically this was the premise of the project, however the negation of public authorship for the final outcome becomes largely unimportant when considering the aim for the initial intended audience to be the participants, who hear their subjective spoken words performed back to them in their own recognisable vernacular.

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