

PhD Proposal

Andi Reiss, 4th June 2018

TITLE

“Actualities and Digital Drama; can technology reconstruct intimate cinema vérité and translate it into a piece à these of technodrama and mixed reality that challenges our perceptions of ethical conundrums?”

I. ABSTRACT

The aim of my research is to explore ways that new technologies can influence 21st century media, opening up a field of possibilities to cross-platform and examine how actuality film, documentary and fiction can breed to create a better truth, whilst critically engaging with one of the most challenging and controversial debates of our time; Medical Assisted Suicide (MAS).

To briefly appraise the subject matter of my proposed Doctoral research, when Jack Kevorkian, an American doctor jailed after admitting helping 130 patients to die, first went on trial in 1994, assisting suicide was a crime everywhere save Switzerland. Now the trend is spreading far and wide, although the right to die is a complex moral principle, and MAS remains one of the most controversial issues of our time; complex and involving many legal, ethical, medical, sociocultural, personal, and religious issues. It is a circular argument, and at this point the question arises, can nature be broken or interfered with? In other words can or should a law be replaced with another?

However, the issue has recently been the subject of new technology itself when Dr Philip Nitschke premiered his suicide machine, which allows people to end their life in minutes. The 3D-printed machine was unveiled at an Amsterdam funeral fair in April 2018, and works by releasing nitrogen into a chamber, which doubles as a biodegradable coffin. Named ‘Sarco’, it includes a panic button in case somebody changes their mind.

Having made a feature documentary throughout 2017/18 entitled ‘Endgame – Assisted Suicide and Legislative Challenge’ (www.endgamemovie.uk), I have some knowledge on the subject of MAS, and access to Dr Philip Nitschke, Dr Michael Irwin, Dr Erika Preisig and many academics, theologians and campaigners to whom I can call upon in my research within this Doctoral study. That said, as an academic discipline, it is the experimental methodology of re-defining genre through cross-platforming media with new technology that forms the basis of my proposal.

Nowadays, traditional documentary filmmaking and what is known as documentary theatre are viewed equally as two alternative methods of philosophy. Yet new technology can have a huge influence, and my study intends to delineate various modes and means of documentary film and interpret and represent in a poetic transition of verbatim theatre (a term utilized by Derek Paget), and then to screen drama. Like any art form, theatre is a reflection of society, telling stories of our history, culture, and events we live through today, and may persuade opinion in a way documentary and journalism may not.

Since its invention, film has been a permanent medium. And like a book with its threaded binding, a documentary film’s spooled polyester strip represents a series of

moments set in figurative stone. We find ourselves in dark rooms absorbing its definitive message, a product of months, or years, of inquiry.

But a stand-alone film, these days, works against the nature of modern media, with its vortex of information, reaction and reassessment. New media actually invites the involvement of audience, rather than simply its attention. And this interaction has come to define the media landscape.

In the 21st century, a single piece of media can spread across a variety of platforms. Yet in an environment of information overload and polarised sparring, news content, social issues and fact based content might not be informing individuals and leading public conversation in a way that helps in building community cohesion and participation, and indeed keeping journalism as open as possible, especially when it comes to subjects deemed somewhat taboo by society. In short, issue-based film could have a bigger impact (and bigger audience), potentially, with a cross-media approach.

With this in mind, I would like to engage upon the challenge of transitioning traditional factual filmmaking to a dramatic arena, utilizing new technology in the hope of being able to provide evidence to the idea that in truth lies the key power and relevance to any work of fiction. I will analyze articles on how the UK media represents the cases of two of the most recent terminally ill patients' right-to-die stories, notably Noel Conway and Omid T, and examine the numerous arguments for and against MAS and how personal stories, when dramatized from real interviews, might vastly alter audience perceptions from what the media reports might indicate.

In addition, the proposing arguments are often challenged with two opposing arguments; assisted suicide is exclusive to the terminally ill and sanctity of life based on faith or religion, and through dramatizing my research, I will hope to provide a new way of defining the notion of autonomy and the ethical question, if assisted suicide is a good and acceptable medical treatment for the purpose of ending suffering, why should it be limited to adults who are capable of decision-making?

II. TOPIC DEVELOPMENT

"The documentarist has a passion for what he finds in images and sounds - which always seem to him more meaningful than anything he can invent," wrote media historian Erik Brnouw.

However, like any form of communication, including journalism, documentary filmmaking involves choice-making on the part of the communicator, and is therefore unavoidably subjective, no matter how balanced or neutral the presentation.

Whilst my focus in the past has been on immersive documentary storytelling, I have an interest in technology, audience engagement, performance philosophy, interactive art, digital practices in reality and performance, and social engagement.

With this in mind, my Doctorial study, within the three-year time-frame will provide me the opportunity to continue the practice of filmmaking that I have enjoyed over twenty years, and to continue to investigate a subject that is arguably the most important debate of our time.

Additionally, it will allow me to go much greater into the social and cultural impact and wider community engagement that integrating mediums might realise, questioning how immersive documentary can be staged through verbatim theatre,

blending the historical and narrative with real or re-created interviews, and then re-created into screen drama.

The rationale behind this is based on the idea that there is an historical overlap between traditional documentary and verbatim theatre and other kinds of fact-based drama, yet how fact-based drama depicts major societal issues as a debate is underexplored, in respect of technology. I aim provide fresh perspectives on an issue that is marginalised by mainstream media, and in so doing, address the question what constitutes the representation of social reality?

Going further, I will examine how utilizing new technologies, can alter an audiences perception of digital drama in verbatim theatre which can then be translated to screen fiction, since watching cinema and television drama is no longer seen as a passive pastime. In focusing on the discipline of translating observational filmmaking (and absorbing the views of practitioners and participants) into documentary theatre, I will hope to provide knowledge and strata in debating whether we need to define media, in this day and age at all.

III. PROPOSED RESEARCH

The root of my research will lie in practicing my existing career and applying this mode, process and technique to further exploring different subjects involved within the issues surrounding MAS around the world, primarily those countries whose legislation has changed recently.

My primary research will predominantly include :-

questioning the most common faith-based complaint that life must be preserved at all costs because it is sacred, and
investigating the pastoral and medical care arguments, from both advocates and disinters of the matter, within the church.

As secondary research I will be looking at arguments that permeate within the parameters of this issue, specifically:-

- the personal stories that resonate within the argument.
- the legal and medical champions of the legal challenges to date, and those whom are continuing.
- the challenges to integration faced by individuals at the hands of tradition, discrimination or social barriers.
- the way 'real life' perspectives can be re-defined in drama.

Elaborating on this, the ethical, emotional, personal, medical and legal debates will be further challenged, but not necessarily for their individual opinion, rather in the way new technologies can benefit an immersive environment. Working on new software programmes, with production resources, filming equipment and projections, and incorporating these within verbatim theatre, I would hope to be able to discover ways of highlighting the issues of MAS that has a much greater impact than journalism.

Seeding from Cinema Vérité in the early 60s by Jean Rouch and travelling to the famous technique of Direct Cinema used frequently by the Maysles Brothers, Frederick Wiseman and Werner Herzog, my research will explore how conventional formats of documentary storytelling fare when exposed to the areana of Theatre of

Fact, the German dramatic movement that arose during the early 1960s, associated primarily with Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss, and Heinar Kipphardt. Their political plays examined historical events, often through official documents and court records, and there is plenty of historical and contemporary content within the issues of MAS to draw upon.

I will also interrogate Bertolt Brecht's theory of "epic theatre", examining how an audience might suspend their disbelief and think introspectively about the particular moments that are occurring on stage and why they are happening a certain way. This is intrinsic when reflecting upon the theory that reality through drama can cultivate an objective response.

I intend to further investigate how Brecht's Theory of Distanciation has influenced contemporary cinema, particularly the work of Jean-Luc Goddard.

It is these codifications that I would like to specifically explore in a practice led, mixed-media study, in order to get a deeper insight into the historical exposure of taboo, and to see how documentary can be translated into a more poetic medium with recorded sound, dance, motion graphics, music and interactivity redefining knowledge as ethical importance. The mass media has, by and large been reluctant to highlight comparative approaches and legislative responses to MAS, and few issues press harder than that of how we must, should or want to face death. A taboo seems an unaffordable luxury.

The playwright and screen-writer David Hare has said that verbatim theatre "does what journalism fails to do", and as also a film director he is particularly known for an incisive commentary on the problems of public institutions and issues that demand debate. Hare has said that he is interested in the struggle to make procedures work better. Perhaps my practice with new technology can add to the argument because whilst there is no medium like documentary, in a sense that it can tell real stories that often the news does not cover. The power of the theatre (that created from the transcription of interviews) in exposing facts to a wider public and inconsequential incidents or anecdotes which a journalist or news desk might ignore, could be very telling.

"21st century media production offers much more than a passive, screen-based experience, and the authorial voice has shifted radically, as has authorship. Perhaps the most revolutionary outcome is that stories are no longer necessarily linear or even cohesive" (Stogner n.d).

In summary, my proposed Doctoral research will take an interdisciplinary methodological approach exploring how new technology can benefit film/art practice, ethnography and verbatim theatre performance as a way of examining the controversial blend of fact and fiction, or screen and stage production. It will be anchored with a thesis summarising all my research, findings and process in creating them, including practice and theoretical demonstrations, especially when influenced; indeed dictated by technology.

1942 words, (Reiss, Andi 04.06.18)