

**The George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling**  
4th – 5th April 2014, University of South Wales, UK

**Title of session:** 'The value of voices: The Student Sex Work Project'

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**Institution:** Newport Film School, University of South Wales

**Discipline:** Documentary Film Practice

**Abstract text:**

In 2012, *The Interactive Health: Student Sex Worker Project* was awarded a lottery grant, to better understand and develop a student sex worker policy in Wales.

[www.thestudentsexworkproject.co.uk](http://www.thestudentsexworkproject.co.uk)

My role at the outset was to create a 'film output' that shed light on the emerging research and to help put 'the project' on the radar of student sex workers.

My work as a filmmaker is built upon a dialogic approach to the form and themes of documentary film practice, embracing the notion of praxis – *the act of engaging, applying, realizing ideas through a 'making action'*. This praxis-based film research, emphasises the importance of 'documentary for use' and engagement with social reality, lived experience and the human condition.

A review of existing materials, and the constant barrage of media requests that came into the Student Sex Work office, confirmed that new ways of articulating the research has become critical. The output requires a practice methodology that is designed to avoid the repetitive, easy and lazy imagery of sex, sex work that our culture endlessly peddles. How to protect the voice of the participants was key to the research methods and film development.

An interview based approach to the issues of concern proved a powerful tool for engaging student sex workers within the project but the method of dissemination of that material and the final form of the output emerged from a praxis based approach. "*In praxis there can be no prior knowledge of the right means by which we realize the end in a particular situation*". (Bernstein 1983: 147).

A trail output structure was tested in the summer of 2013 using a drama documentary model, placing the voices of the participants, front and centre. This 'transcription story' was a verbatim re-presentation (using actors) of the initial interviews. Voices, revoiced. The full film was shot in February 2014 and I will

present the first screening of sections of the edited film at the conference. This research has significant implications for media outputs in all higher educational contexts, and also offers much potential for supporting students who are thinking or currently working in the sex industry.

Further reading and references:

Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Penguin.

Bernstein, R. J. (1983). *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, hermeneutics and praxis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Thinking Through Practice. Art as Research in the Academy, Melbourne: RMIT University

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### ***The value of voices: The Student Sex Work Project***

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*The Student Sex Work Project. I will get onto that in a while – but I want to first of all take some time out to think about the notion of the voice and its value.*

*The value of the voice – especially in documentary has to be seen in the context of time. I was intending to speak solely about my current project but two recent events brought into sharp focus notions of voice – events that were predicated on the passing of time.*

*I am speaking to you not in your present but in your past. The naked eye is not a reliable guide to your world.*

*“Each time a photon hits light receptors on the retina, it triggers a Rube-Goldbergian chemical reaction that takes tens of milliseconds to reset. We don’t notice this interruption – our brains smooth it over into an apparently fluid stream of visual information.”*  
*(American Scientist Aug 2010 Brendan Borrell)*

*Light is fast – but it’s not fast enough.*

*We have tried to overcome the limitations of our sight with machines that can see specks deep in space and specs deep inside us –*

*We have tried to build machines that can capture the present and preserve it (I’ve spent the last 30 years doing just that). But the present is a tricky thing as Henri Bergson was keen to point out – “it is difficult to be here and now because firstly there is no here and now, only continual movement” Michael Foley p62. Life Lessons from Bergson (The school of Life) Macmillan London 2013.*

*In Nostalgia for the Light by Patricio Guzman  
Astronomer - Gaspar Galaz*

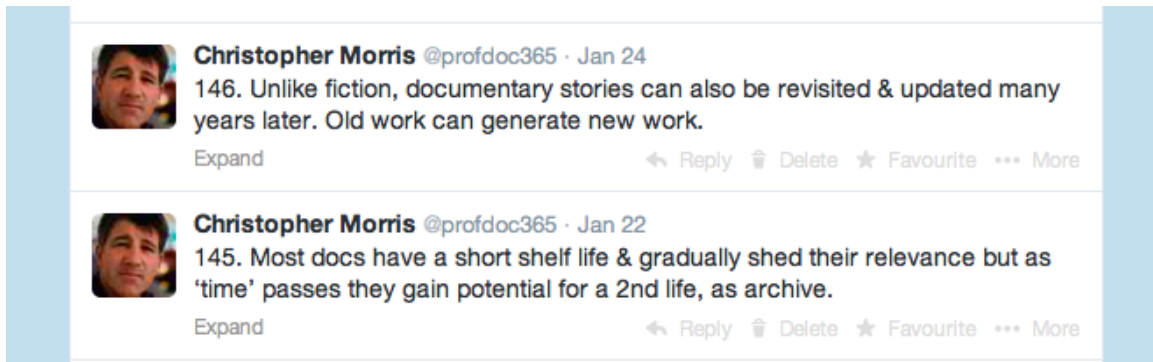
*“All of our life experiences including this conversation, happened in the past. Even if it is a matter of millionths of a second. The camera I am looking at now is a few metres away and therefore already several millionths of a second in the past in relation to the time on my watch. The signal takes time to arrive. The light reflected from the camera or from you, reaches me after a moment. A fleeting moment as the speed of light is very fast.”*

*“That’s the trap – the present doesn’t exist. Its true. The only present that might exist is the one in my mind. It’s the closest we come to the absolute present. And not even then when I think, it takes a moment for the signal to travel between my senses. Between when I say “this is me” and when I touch myself, there is a lapse in time.”*

*He goes onto say: “The past is the astronomers’ main tool. We manipulate the past – that’s how it is.”*

*For years I was suffering under the delusion that what I was doing as a documentary filmmaker was capturing the voices of the present – but is now plainly clear I have only captured voices from the past.*

*As I said – it is thirty years this year since I began this process.  
@profdoc365*



*Then out of the blue – two productions from the mid 90's suddenly found they had potentially new voices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The link between the productions was that in both cases I had attempted in some way to hand over the means of production to the participants:*

*2010 - Documentary Photography from 'The Lost City' (BBC 1995) were included in the 'Nothing Is In The Place' exhibition as part of PHOTO MONTH, Krakow, Poland.*

## THE LOST CITY

1994

**The Lowdown – The Lost City** (CBBC – 1x30mins)

Director

1:4 children living in Britain live in poverty. A portrait of three boys, three families in one street in South Wales.

*'This programme is one of the most damning indictments of nineties Britain I have seen in a long time' TES*

The voice as image. There is the voice of Christopher Morris the younger ambitious director trying to make his mark – and there are the voices of the boys – but the strongest documentary voice is through the still cameras I gave them.

BBC Wales are in the process of commissioning programmes and films connected to twin themes of FAMILY & VALLEYS – I had no intention of submitting ideas – but once the possibility came on my horizon – I could not get the idea of re visiting the territory and giving them cameras again as adults to re capture their visual voices twenty years on.

Then last month – Talking with Theatre director Matthew Dunster. He mentioned he was writing a musical about a block of flats in Sheffield. Park Hill.

1994/1996

**As Seen On TV** (CBBC – Series I, II and III – 18x30mins)

Series Producer

A video diaries series made by and for children.

*Winner of the 1995 BAFTA and RTS award for Best Children's Programme.*

*Winner of the best children's programme at the 1995 Chicago Children's Film Festival.*

*'Top-notch entertainment and genuinely challenging.... awesome' The Guardian*

Now in 2014 – twenty years on from the broadcast. The voices of these children will find a new form of expression through the music.

Obviously, I will need to seek permission.

These two events have coincided with the creation of my current production FOG OF SEX and have profoundly altered my notion of what I am currently actually doing.

When I agreed to speak today I thought I'd simply be speaking about the journey of voice translation - and that the value of the voice was in the substance of their words and in the creative interpretation I gave it – but I now realise that the value of the voices may not be in the present but in the future – as I have the luxury (or the constraint) of being able to capture and preserve my stories for the future in a form that I dictate and control – and it has a future yet to be determined.

So - what is FOS and what is the Student Sex Project?

In 2012, *The Interactive Health: Student Sex Worker Project* was awarded a lottery grant, **to better understand and develop a student sex worker policy in Wales.** [www.thestudentsexworkproject.co.uk](http://www.thestudentsexworkproject.co.uk)

My role at the outset was to create a film output that shed light on the emerging research and to help put the project on the radar of student sex workers, policy makers, Universities and the general public.

My work as a filmmaker is built upon a dialogic approach to the form and themes of documentary film practice, embracing the notion of praxis – *the act of*

*engaging, applying, realizing ideas through a 'making action'.* This praxis-based film research, emphasises the importance of “documentary for use” and engagement with social reality, lived experience and the human condition.

In other words – I set off down the path of making with little notion of where/what the final form would be.

Initially I was asked to make a short animation – I realised straight away that there was a greater potential for a longer/more expansive documentary film and anyway – I was not an animator!

A review of existing materials, and the constant barrage of media requests that came into the Student Sex Work office, confirmed that new ways of articulating the research has become critical.

The output requires a practice methodology that is designed to avoid the repetitive, easy and lazy imagery of sex, sex work that our culture endlessly peddles.

How to protect the voice of the participants was key to the research methods and film development.

An interview based approach to the issues of concern proved a powerful tool for engaging student sex workers within the project but the method of dissemination of that material and the final form of the output only emerged during this process of research gathering/interviews.

Four Stages:

- A short animation. Would not address the breadth of experience or maximize impact.
- Documentary – on solid ground/safe territory – Voices would be gathered and used in their raw form - but the interviews that were beginning to be collected were promised anonymity.
- Drama – In the early stage of research gathering I thought that re-interpretation of the gathered voices would be a possible way forward. Spoke with the writer Owen Sheers.
- Drama/Documentary – As the weight of voices mounted it became abundantly clear that I had to find a way to allow the voices – unaltered – to speak. Dramatic interpretation (the mixing of stories) would in the end water down the potential impact)

The form of the drama doc was and is fluid. However the notion of actors reconstructed voices – actors recasting the documentary interviews in a hybrid form was the way I have chosen to take the project forward.

Summer 2013:

- I chose the strongest/varied testimonies – 10 in all.
- I created a script using the verbatim interview transcripts.
- A trail output structure was tested in the summer of 2013 using a drama documentary model – the key was to test the balance of recreated documentary style interviews with dramatic scenes.
- Key Issues – nudity, representation of men, respect for the stories & anonymity for contributors, representation through the choice of actors etc – also find a balance between a sellable product that reaches an audience and being the bone fide dissemination arm of an academic research project.
- Autumn 2013 – Tender/preproduction/casting/rehearsals.
- The full film was shot in February 2014.
- April 2014 currently editing underway. Here we have wrestled with the exact form – which up until last week was still fluid – intercutting voices vs partitioned voices for example. The dramatic scenes vs straight testimony.
  
- I now present the first screening of sections of the edited film at this conference. I present one of the ten voices that make up FOS.
  
- The film is modeled on the FOG OF WAR (Errol Morris) and carries the subtitle “10 lessons from the frontline of student sex work”. This story is lesson 8 & 9.
  
- There is no consistent narrative drive in the film – simply a series of voices/testimonies that gradually unfold from light to dark. This story is from the final dark part of the film.

In truth – what is the value of this film and the oxygen we give these voices. Time will tell.