

The Making of “Fog of Seks” —een studenten-project

The reality of re-creation

Professor Christopher Morris

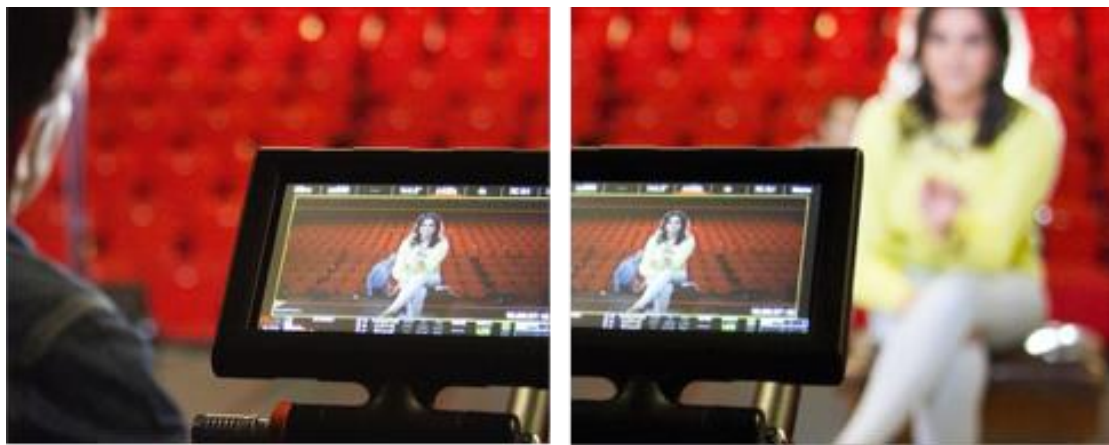
Director of the School of Film and Television, Falmouth University England

June 1st 2017

Sekswerk onder studenten: Mythe of realiteit?

Internationaal wetenschappelijk symposium en ^{SEP}filmvoorstelling ^{SEP}Studenten & Sekswerk

Hogeschool PXL • Elfde Liniestraat 24 • B-3500 Hasselt



SLIDE: Image from Peche Merle

This is a photograph from the PECHE MERLE cavern, in the Lot valley. It shows the ochre hand imprint of human being created around 25,000 years ago – this is someone making their mark – a statement – a story.

“We are storytelling creatures who seek to report experience, clarify tangled emotion, define and amuse ourselves through narrative: jokes, anecdotes, myth, romance, parable, folktale, history, fiction. Stories, it is argued, inspire, heal, inform, and empower: forms of consciousness, ways of thinking that help us to deal with the unexpected, to imagine other possibilities.” Brian Dunnigan – screenwriter/filmmaker

Storytelling and Film Fairy Tales, Myth and Happy Endings, by Brian Dunnigan 2004 (P.O.V.: A Danish Journal of Film Studies)

“Humans like to daydream, to re-make our world” Says curator Eve Ropek in her introduction to the Never Never exhibition at the Aberystwyth Arts Centre (2012), ‘and we tend to like a narrative drive to make sense of incoming information. Stories are tardis-like repositories of shared data...they act as richly textured short cuts for busy human brains, supplying visual and verbal information that can be much faster reaching than the sum of its parts...”

Eve Ropek

Never Never, Aberystwyth Arts centre (2012)

SLIDE: Beach photo of boy reading Harry Potter oblivious to an emergency unfolding behind him.

This image I took with my phone a few years ago in West Wales.....an accident on the beach and air ambulance attract a huge crowd – except the boy in the image who was oblivious because JK Rowling has him by the scruff of the neck and won't let him go...the power of story – captured by a story capturing machine.

The camera that took the image is designed to capture the present and preserve it. But as astronomer Gaspar Galaz reminds us in the excellent 2010 documentary about the Chilean disappeared – *Nostalgia for the light...*

SLIDE: “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”.**

Astronomer - Gaspar Galaz

Nostalgia for the Light by Patricio Guzman (2010)

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

Documentary filmmakers also play in time – they are time travellers – who capture and manipulate the past – sending stories into a future to be initially read as the present – and then the past.

My job is to capture the essence of this present – and make it a compelling recreation of that present – a recreation so compelling that stops you thinking about making a cup of tea, sort car insurance or worry about the mortgage and keep you rooted in the dilemmas I present you with.

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.

In 2012, *two* women walked into my life. Academics Tracy Sagar and Debbie Jones from Swansea University.

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

I joined the bid team and my role from 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.

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 subject and research was critical.

The output required a practice methodology that was designed to avoid the repetitive, easy and lazy imagery of sex, sex work that our culture endlessly peddles and that would protect the participants.

In the early stage of research, I thought that a drama that would re-interpret the gathered voices would be a possible way forward. I spoke with the writer Owen Sheers and together we explored the idea.

However, as the research developed we accumulated a weight of voices that were clear/powerful and ‘real’ and it became abundantly clear that I had to find a way to allow these voices – unaltered – to speak.

Conventional fictional/dramatic interpretation (and a mixing of the stories) would in the end water down the potential impact.

Actors recasting the documentary interviews in a hybrid form was the way I chose to take the project forward.

5 years after the initial meeting with Debbie and Tracy, the result is a 60-minute drama/documentary film, concerned with student sex work in the UK. *Fog of Sex: Stories from the frontline of student sex work.*

Using clips for the behind the scenes/casting tapes/auditions and rehearsal I will now attempt to take you on the journey of making – the praxis development of the film.

SLIDE/FILM. The 13-minute film is paused at various points during the next part of the presentation, illustrating the process/making/journey of the production.

The Student Sex work project (SSWP) website – attracted participants to the research project and students began to engage with the project – tell stories, interact forums and were introduced to the idea of ‘potential’ participation in a film.

Participants who were happy to engage with the film were interviewed by one but usually a pair of academics/researchers from the project.

I worked at Newport Film School and I also gathered a team of **student documentary researchers** who also began to look for the stories – and were directed specifically to find participants in areas of sex work which were not being reflected/reached through the main website portal. Such as ‘panty sellers’ and ‘phone sex workers’.

Research was digital/online and also physical – We visited massage parlour/lap dancing clubs in Cardiff.

The film, from its conception was to be **STUDENT FOCUSED** – staffed by student researchers, a student crew and student/graduate actors.

Key Issues that were resolved through the research period included – the visualisation of sex work and nudity, the representation of men, respect for the stories & anonymity for contributors, representation of the sex workers, through the choice/casting of actors etc

From those who connected/participated in our project offering their stories, we interviewed 14 student sex workers wither audio only or on camera.

From the 14, we chose nine for filming. A range of stories and experience – that would hopefully reflect the emerging theses of the research/academic project. However – we really didn't know what the findings would be and so the choices were led in the end by the fact that each was a good stand-alone story in its own right.

The filmed Interviews were the transcribed exactly (adding in all their casual intimations).

The original research films (as agreed with the participants) were then deleted. The sex workers also were given an opportunity to comment on the text script based on their interview. From then on I was only working with text creating a script, which used the verbatim material but it was edited, re-ordered and shaped for sense and time.

The next stage was to create a short pilot to test the monologue idea and to re-inflate the words for authenticity. How would it sound? Could it sustain? It would also give me a chance to test a coherent visual strategy for the film.

Test shoot – Summer 2013.

A trial output structure was tested in the summer of 2013 using a drama documentary model, placing the voices of the participants, front and centre – the key was to test the balance of recreated documentary style interviews with dramatic scenes.

The TEST proved that the concept worked visually and verbally but that everything now depended on performance/authenticity and so the casting of each character became my prime concern.

I now needed to HEAR entire script through the blood, bones and mind of actors. So I asked for volunteers from the performing arts course at Newport to stage a complete read through.

I met the student actors and we chatted informally as a group. We spoke at length about their attitudes to sex work in general, their first thoughts on the roles and the script/words and we speculated about real people.

I watched them interact as a group. I was more interested in what they said as we chatted, how they arrived and sat down, who held back etc. And I assigned parts on a semi random, intuitive basis – certain people were given certain parts - some ‘personalities’ naturally went for certain roles – others simply given out at random.

They were given their individual parts to study for just a few days

We held a filmed read-through at the film school. Present were the producers (recent graduates) took notes. To my surprise three students impressed me (and in the end were given roles in the film)

However - We then went into full casting mode. We ran a campaign in Spotlight (the actors online talent portal) clearly stating that the piece was concerned with sex work, they would be onscreen for long takes/long monologues.... but the roles would not involve nudity or filming simulated sex scenes. These were challenging roles for young women, an interesting subject with light/shade and depth in the piece.

We received 2,000 applicants – I think it says something about the paucity of good roles for young female actors.

We did not send them a specific role – they were sent the full script (9 stories) and simply asked to prepare ONE story that spoke to them. So we did not give them any information about ethnicity, age, etc – the key to what their choice should be empathy.

Over 50 actors were auditioned in London, Cardiff and Newport.

The casting began as soon as they arrived and we filmed their reactions to the part, the script, the idea of sex work, teasing out their thoughts/reaction – this was the most important part of the casting process – they’re views/insight/empathy/understanding was key.

(Note: They gave their permission at the casting session for us to use this filmed material in our project).

Physical similarity to the original subjects was always subordinate to **embodiment** of the person's spirit. **Intelligence was the overriding factor in the casting** – their understanding of the person/their ambiguities/dilemmas/the life/the stigma etc.

Authenticity of voice - realness/ordinariness/ naturel-ness of their delivery was vital but also empathy, understanding of the nuances and dilemmas paramount.

Virtually all actors that were cast – were first timers in front of a camera, so some it was their first professional role. Their nervousness (as well as intelligence) also turned out to be the positive overriding factors in the casting.

I was looking for two distinct groups of actors:

The first half of film made up of 5/6 shorter stories - of a few minutes each. Here the casting **risk was less acute, and we had a wealth of actors to choose from. However the last half of the film - 30-minutes of material would be entirely carried by two actors/two stories.** Here the casting was the imperative – and a wrong decision at this stage would effectively undermine the effectiveness of the film.

I chose Lucy to play one of the escort workers Anna (name changed). Lucy was a calculated risk – she had studied Fine Art at Oxford – and had no formal acting training at university, but since graduating had been cast in a few plays and was beginning to carve out a fledgling career as an actor. Her fierce intelligence in her reading of one of the smaller/shorter stories (the porn story) impressed me. I saw potential and asked her to read Anna (one of the major roles). Her immediate response was superb.

For the other major role I chose (against the wishes of the producer) Peta to play Posie. There is no doubt on paper this was a real risk because Peta was a year II acting student from the original read through in Newport – she had never done a professional job and never been in front of the camera but something about her reading/performance was speaking to me. I was transported when she spoke back to the original interview.

I've rarely use the word VERBATIM when talking about this production – because for some verbatim means you do not interfere with the material – but a faithfulness to every 'umm' & 'err' was less important to me than authenticity of voice. I was clear that I shaped the material – I didn't add anything but I did edit/move and shape the text for impact, sense and also for timing (to squeeze the stories in!)

The actors never saw the original filmed material – I'm the only person with the full picture. I gave them an idea of the real circumstances of the person behind the words but nothing else. My technique was to talk about the character – not about how to act as that character.

I felt under pressure as the director to have all the answers – my solution was to say up front that I didn't have all the answers and it was our job together to find ways forward.

I think the fact that I make documentaries means I have a nose for authenticity, and when things worked we noted it – and I allowed them rope to go where they felt comfortable. If I found myself transported back – and lost sight of the script – I felt it was going in the right direction.

The shoot took place over a three-week period, largely shooting in the Cardiff/Newport area - South Wales. Feb/March 2014.

The filming schedule was completely designed around maximising screen time for actors – I did not attempt complex tracking/movement shots – keep the camera still and allowing the actors to work within long takes. There was one complex shot we did attempt – it took about 5 hours to film and eventually was not used in the film.

The overriding visual approach was symmetry in the interview sections and locations clearly representing a variety of recognisable university type locations – without out being specific. The film was visually influenced by the photography of Gus Wiley (Hebrideans) and Roy Andersson (Swedish director of You, The Living).

In the interviews - my presence as an actor playing myself was vital – for intervention/interaction.

I appear in the film as 'myself' – the interviewer – and I could play with that role to my advantage – firstly the actors new they were talking with/being interviewed by a filmmaker who had interviewed and asked the same question to the sex workers – and so there was an authority and authenticity to my presence. I used my position to try to unsettle the actors (whilst on camera). I interrupted 'well prepared' tracks of dialogue with questions/clarifications – or asked questions deliberately out of order to phase them on camera... and this was where their intelligence took over – they responded and played with me on camera. It leant an air of authenticity to their performance.

Takes would be long – running through the whole thing or big sections – even if there were mistakes or passages which were not great – we'd carry on and review at the end of the take

The film was constructed from two elements:

- **Original interview recreation** – the characters were talking to me (the interviewer) which put them under pressure - The fact that the actors had not been in front of a camera was an asset – often the uncomfortable nature of their position showed.
- **Reconstructed sequences of scenarios described in their interviews.** In these sequences the characters talk straight into the lens, directly to the audience.

The actors did not interact with others. First time many of them met was at the cast/crew screening.

Editing – April/May 2014 .

The film editor was Andy Netley an Emmy Award winning NHU editor. We edited in his cottage on his kitchen table.

Here we have wrestled with the exact form of the final film.

I originally planned to intercut the stories based on THEMES that emerged in the research phase such as: their reasons of starting, initial thoughts, secrecy and stigma, money, attitudes to men, violence and danger etc. However – we realized in the edit that if we did that there would be no narrative drive to the piece – and so we decided to present each persons story in discreet sections – and the film would unfold for the audience as a series of voices/stories/testimonies that gradually unfold... from light to dark.

The subtitle for the film – “stories from the frontline of student sex work” is taken is modelled on the ***The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*** (Errol Morris 2003). Our opening graphic gave you a visual representation of how many stories you were going to see in the film....

Impact:

The full-length drama documentary has been broadcast on The Community Channel twice (May 2016)

A series of five shorts (extracted from the full length version) have been broadcast on BBC III online and BBC III YouTube channel. From November 2015 onwards. They are still currently available on both platforms.

The combined shorts had achieved over 117K hits on the BBC III YouTube channel.

2015 - Public screenings organized by BAFTA Cymru, plus Q&A at Universities and venues including - Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Bangor University and the University of South Wales.

Other public screenings include, The Cube, Bristol, The Hay on Wye cinema during the Hay Festival, Plymouth University, St John and St Mark University and Falmouth University.

The film was also screened in the spring of 2015 at a massage parlour in central Cardiff. The audience consisted of sex workers, the managers of a couple of parlours in Cardiff, a police liaison officer and TSSWP team members.

The film/parts of the film also screened at conferences in Belgium, Germany, Wales and England.

Awards:

The film won, Best Cinematography (factual) at the 2015 BAFTA Cymru Awards.

The film won Best Film for Young People at the 2016 Celtic Media Awards.

However – there have been a number of film outputs from the research and filmed material that were - unplanned at the start, that very much take their place along side the main project:

We filmed two lap dance stories – but only used one in the film. The other one – Beth’s story has been cut into a ten-minute stand-alone film that is now used in academic training sessions.

Secondly we also produced Anna’s Video diary. One of the sex workers was encouraged to keep a video diary of her life over a couple of months. The footage was powerful and revealing – so we cut a short stand-alone film from the material and when Anna (name changed) was happy with the film we ‘reshot it’ with an actor exactly as the original. We then deleted the original. This film is also used in the SSWP training package.

I was sent an email by one of the participant student sex workers:

“I feel very privileged that even though I daren't tell people what I do, that you have told my story for me. That feels very empowering. I am so grateful that you took my story so seriously and I can see that in the film...and its something I will carry with me for a long time. And basically I just want to say that it means a lot to me.

I have found a lot of comfort having my story told and actually knowing the film was being made has played a really big part in helping me deal with the secrecy, which drives me crazy - because in a way lots of people do know about my other life now. And I cannot describe that feeling.

...I am really glad and privileged that I shared my shit with you”.

Anna

Throughout the three-year production period – the team were inundated with calls from media production companies – researching/making films concerned with students and sex. Would we contribute, could we make our findings available? What have you found out?

By having a film production at the centre of the academic research process – it was simple to bat these unsolicited queries away. I acted as a knowledgeable buffer.

I had access to highly sensitive material – but because my entire production came from a very different perspective, people – well women – opened up to us.

TO CONCLUDE:

There are two overriding issues that remain:

Firstly – because of my use of actors - the film has not made it onto mainstream network TV in the UK. I do not regret my creative approaches/choices – they were made to ensure anonymity but they run in opposition to current TV norms – where having REAL people on screen – even if blanked out/wearing masks – is paramount. There is something about TV in the UK, which demands prurient intrusion.

Men – are missing – they simply did not engage with our project in the numbers or with the stories we needed. Ironically – after the film was made – they began to come forward. It is a regret - and an omission. Especially, in the light of the findings – but when you watch the complete film tonight – I'd be interested in your reaction to my solution.

This creative research has significant implications for higher education.

The Student Sex work project was at its heart a cross-disciplinary, multi centre research project with a film output at its centre – offering a creative opportunities and outlets for participants, a consistent and active media resources from the research project (website – but also the video diary project) and crucially driving interest/impact long after the findings are published.

I am looking for research projects to join... to create stories to capture and send into an uncertain future.

Stories are delicate, febrile elements prone to loss and obliteration. Unless they are told, retold and remembered there is the certainty of loss - but it is exactly this fragile nature – their precious nature - that can give a story force.

JK Rowling
Harvard University 2008

“Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation.

In its arguable most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathise with humans whose experiences we have never shared”.

As quoted in Enchanted Hunters - P197 (Maria Tatar)

FOG OF SEX (Stories from the frontline of student sex work)

Synopsis:

Student sex workers talk.

Based on exhaustive research interviews, FOG OF SEX brings to the screen the real life testimonies of students currently working within the UK sex industry.

Three years in the making, this documentary drama recreates the stories and experiences of nine female sex workers who balance a life in Higher Education, with life as a sex worker. To preserve anonymity the student sex workers are played by actors, all the dialogue however is verbatim, drawn directly from the interview transcripts. This frank and constantly surprising film does not judge and does not take sides – it presents the stories ‘as they were told’ and leaves room for the audience to decide.

FOG OF SEX is directed by BAFTA award winning filmmaker Christopher Morris. The film is entirely researched, produced and filmed by staff, graduates and students of Newport Film School. The film is made as part of The Student Sex Work Project, a lottery funded research study run by Swansea University.

IMDB Full cast/crew credits

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5040268/fullcredits/>

Shorts online:

BBC III YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6W31P0e9Qo&index=1&list=PL64ScZt2I7wF6VPfD7gIGgl4X80DLPBCe>

BBC III online

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/tag/sex-and-relationships/2>

Impact:

Broadcast and screenings:

The full-length drama documentary has been broadcast on The Community Channel twice (May 2016) and a series of five shorts (extracted from the full length version) have been broadcast on BBC III online and BBC III Youtube channel. From November 2015 onwards. They are still currently available on both platforms. By August 2016 the combined shorts had achieved over 63K hits on the BBC III YouTube channel.

2015 - Public screenings organized by BAFTA Cymru, plus Q&A of "Fog of Sex" (Morris/Visual Influence 2015) at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Bangor University and the University of South Wales. Other public screenings include, The Cube, Bristol, The Hay on Wye cinema during the Hay Festival, Plymouth University, St John and St Mark University and Falmouth University.

The film was also screened in the spring of 2015 at a massage parlour in central Cardiff. The audience consisted of sex workers, the managers of a couple of parlour's in Cardiff, a police liaison officer and TSSWP team members.

Conferences:

2013 - "The politics and value of creative dissemination - The Student Sex Work Project" at the "The Value(s) of Sexual Diversity" Third International Conference of the International Network for Sexual Ethics and Politics. INSEP. 14-16 October, 2013 Ghent University, Belgium

2013 - "The complexities of sex work: challenges for creative dissemination" at the Sex work and well-being symposium" Swansea University, May 2013.

2014 - Extracts screened: "The Value of Voices" at the 'Storytelling & the Voice' symposium, The George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling. Atrium. University of South Wales, 5th April 2014.

2015 - The Student Sex Work Project final conference - "Will the real sex worker please stand up" Liberty Stadium, Swansea. 27th March 2015. Paper delivered: "Innovations in dissemination: Telling stories - making an impact and reducing stigma".

2015 – "Casting Authenticity" a paper delivered at the 'Working with Actors' conference - CILECT conference, HFF, Munich, Germany (17-19 November 2015)

2017 – Re-creating Reality – a paper delivered plus a screening of the full film at PXL Hogeschool, Hasselt, Belgium (1 June 2017)

Awards:

The Producers (Visual Influence) were nominated for Best Newcomer at the 2015 BAFTA Cymru Awards.

The film won, Best Cinematography (factual) at the 2015 BAFTA Cymru Awards.

The film won Best Film for Young People at the 2016 Celtic Media Awards.

Review:

<http://www.themetropolist.com/film/reviews/fog-of-sex/>

FILM REVIEWS - 30 APR 2015 - BY [PHILLIP K. MOTT](#)

REVIEW: Fog of Sex

Fog of Sex is the latest documentary by BAFTA award-winning filmmaker Christopher Morris. It is the story of people who are, for the most part, normal students in British Higher Education. They also happen to be sex workers. Ranging between glamour models, online party-sellers, "dressed to impress" cleaners, lap dancers, escorts, and pornographic actresses, the film follows nine such individuals as they retell in candid camera style the story of their more alternative careers.

The film begins with the funnier, less intense narratives, which disarmed my usual critical arrogance. This is no patronising exposé on why the sex industry is worse than everything else in the world ever. The gamut it runs is varied and fair, but there is still no doubt at the film's conclusion about the dangerous realities that students face in the sex industry. *Fog of Sex* escalates the viewer's emotional investment along with the stakes and the accounts become dark. Very dark.

The featured women come to talk of rape, violence, and extortion as often as confidence and self-expression, and you wonder as the credits roll: is this empowerment the true way of things? Or, as the film's director later put it, is it a "mantra" they offer themselves as comfort? He was careful not to come down either way on the matter, and it's perhaps this impartiality that gives *Fog of Sex* its bare-bones, data-driven elegance.

The decision to use actors was questioned by critics at the premiere, and it has made TV networks so reluctant to take on the film that just one has shown interest in its current form. After the screening, director Christopher Morris spoke to me of doubts he has about the documentaries the public want: "[the networks] wanted the real people onscreen and a celebrity voiceover telling you what to think. I didn't want that. I don't even want money for the film. This was National Lottery funded. I was giving it away for free and they still didn't want it in its current form."

It's a shame, because this is the sort of filmmaking that educates rather than desensitises. It demonises neither men nor women and there is no hyperrealism for gossipy audiences to fetishise. It neither speaks down to the audience nor overreaches to lofty ideas above its station, and it more than fulfils the entertainment impulse to which Mr. Morris has admitted. Each shot is rendered with exquisite symmetry and richness of colour, and it's done with the restrained visual trickery of a veteran documentarian.

Morris also spoke of how recent documentaries on Channel 4 and BBC3 have used masks and suchlike to get around the demand for sensational realism and how such theatricality would have ruined the "still, blunt, austere" tone he was striving for. Morris and his team are academics from the University of Swansea, and their film is the delicate staging of firsthand accounts and statistics one would hope for from such a pedigree.

Around 7000 students working in the sex industry were interviewed for the study, and the film's script was woven from the transcripts of nine. Their names, locations, and courses were changed, and none outside the production team knew their real identity. It gives the film the ethical backbone of an academic study and keeps the content free from the bias of evading judgment. It makes the documentary more believable than any verbatim interview footage could have been.

For that, Morris has thanks to give. The considerable talent in front of the camera weaves a watchable web of empathy-invoking conviction and charm. It doesn't seem to matter what humanity they were asked to perform: confident naivety, strong-hearted fragility, or optimistic regret. It seems a cliché, but there were occasions on which I had to remind myself that the real sex workers were not on screen.

Fog of Sex is a powerful piece of filmmaking that shines a nuanced, pathos-smattered light on the realm of student sex work. It reveals to us what we don't want to hear: that sexual exploitation is as much a product of our education system and economy as it is the machinations of the cruel. The only people left to combat the tide are the universities and the cinemas and that, like the final moments of *Fog of Sex*, is perhaps a small ray of hope.