

DRAWING ON TOPOLSKI : A CASE STUDY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

1. DRAWING ON TOPOLSKI

I am in the middle of the offline edit of a short documentary film, "Drawing on Topolski", which will follow the story of a reportage drawing project inspired by the legacy of the Polish émigré artist Feliks Topoloski. This paper will trace the evolution of the film to date, particularly exploring the relationship between the process of documentary film and reportage drawing, which in its depiction of real life, is surely also a form of documentary.

2. PRACTICE AS RESEARCH : EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP OF REPORTAGE DRAWING & DOCUMENTARY FILM

I would like to briefly frame the paper within the context of Practice as Research. I have been given approximately one month's research leave from my work to make the film. This has been an important step forward within our department as it gives new credibility to film making practice as research, rather than a previous emphasis on just theoretical interpretation. It's worth noting that the essence of Practice as Research as described by REF documentation is encapsulated in the three short statements, 'a process of investigation', 'leading to new insights', that are 'effectively shared' (REF 2011, p.48) and it is this essential paradigm that I will be pursuing here. But I'd nevertheless like to state from the outset that I am approaching this paper very much as a filmmaker.

3. THE TOPOLSKI RESIDENCY PROGRAMME

The film project started through a casual conversation with my colleague Gary Embury from the Illustration Department at UWE who specialises in reportage drawing and who mentioned that he had recently visited the Topolski Studios in London, with whom he was planning to set up a residency programme to train young artists in the art of reportage drawing. The Residency Programme was subsequently devised, for six young artists not in training or employment, to develop their skills as reportage artists through a series of masterclasses and workshops over a three month period.

4. FELIKS TOPOLSKI

In that initial conversation, Gary also told me how Feliks Topolski had been such an inspirational figure for him as a reportage artist. To be honest, I'd never heard of Topolski, but was intrigued when Gary described how he had arrived in London from Poland in 1935, was on most war fronts in the second half of the twentieth century, and over a forty year period, had drawn many of the most significant political events and figures of the second half of the twentieth century. For example, he was the first war artist into Bergen Belsen, he drew the Nuremberg Trials, the Harlem Riots, the Black Panther Movement, as well as drawing portraits of many of the leading political and cultural figures of the time, such as Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, Andy Warhol and Bob Dylan.

5. WHAT IS REPORTAGE DRAWING ?

Above all, Topoloski was known for his on the spot rapid sketching style, where he would quickly render an almost sculptural representation of the scene in front of him through a swirling assemblage of rapidly drawn lines to give the impression or capture of his subject, which helps explain why he has become such an important figure for the burgeoning movement in reportage drawing.

In terms of defining reportage drawing, it can broadly be described as drawing in the field, on location, observing the actuality of life as it happens in the moment. And like documentary, the artist is free to turn their attention to whatever subject matter they choose, often gravitating towards the social, the political, or the journalistic as a means of engaging

meaningfully with the world around them : what I often describe to documentary filmmaking students as the creative interpretation of reality. David Driver, former head of design at the Times newspaper, describes its practice like this :

“Reportage is the most difficult form of illustration, because it involves everything : observing, being able to draw people, working with moving figures, focusing on particular incidents, having a strong graphic sense, and being able to tell a story.”

6. FILMING THE RESIDENCY PROGRAMME

In the event, the Residency Programme started much earlier than I expected, and coincided with the start of the academic year, so while the residents had already started doing masterclasses, and had been on drawing expeditions to fracking protests, the races, dance studios and abandoned council estates in and around London, I was frustratingly left in Bristol to struggle with timetables, module briefs and swarms of needy undergraduate students.

When I finally began to disentangle myself from all of that, I rushed up to London to meet Gary and the Residents at the Millennium Dome, to film a day's drawing, first of all on an impossibly fast moving river boat proceeding up the river Thames and then opposite the Houses of Parliament.

I mention this because from the outset I was forced to work in a far less prepared way than I would normally : rather than preparing for production through a continual process of research and creative development, I was literally tipped into action and forced to think on my feet, taking a far more improvised and sketch like approach to the filmmaking process.

7. THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

That same afternoon the group went to draw on the South Bank, overlooking the River Thames, right opposite the Houses of Parliament, where Gary got the residents to draw together on a giant twenty foot piece of tracing paper which he unfurled and taped down to the pavement. The residents rose to the challenge by taping bits of charcoal to fallen branches and even to the end of an umbrella and just started drawing.

As I circled around them, framing, reframing, changing angle and refocusing (again just trying to imagine a sequence that would somehow cut together in the edit suite), I could feel their drawing loosening up, becoming more expressive. Drawing with twigs and branches and umbrellas created wavering and blurred lines that worked beautifully in their lack of control. A police helicopter hovered overhead and curious passers by stopped to watch the illustrators at work, bringing out their smartphones and i-pads to photograph what must have seemed rather a curious piece of impromptu street performance, a kind of pop up free drawing event.

8. CAMERA STYLO / FILMING STYLE

When I'm making a film, I document the process through a production folder and also through a production diary, and when I sat down to reflect on the day's filming, I was reminded of Alexandre Astruc's notion of the 'camera-stylo', or 'camera pen', that the director might wield their camera like a writer might use their pen (Astruc, 1948). Astruc was talking more specifically about the idea of the filmmaker as auteur, as a modern replacement of the author or artist, but the idea of the camera-stylo as a means of inscribing the reality around you seemed to now hold particular resonance, particularly in this close harmony between the quick observational drawings of the young artists and the necessarily fast filming style that I had to adopt earlier in the day.

9. THE TOPOLSKI CHRONICLES

Every month through the fifties and sixties Feliks Topolski had hand printed a monthly chronicle or bulletin of his latest work on brown butcher's paper, the paper butchers used to wrap meat, as a way of distributing his work to a wider audience, which as art critic Jeffrey Dennis describes, became almost a precursor of the modern day blog. These Chronicles had covered major events such as the Queens Coronation, Winston Churchill's funeral, the use of data in creating a census, street fashions, the assassination of Malcolm X, the Harlem Riots and so on. They literally became a chronicle of Topolski's life and times, all observed through his on the spot drawings.

10. MEMOIR OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This idea of chronicling or documenting through eye witness observation was evident in another of Topolski's art projects, the Memoir of the Twentieth Century, a six hundred foot mural that he painted through the eighties in his studios under the Waterloo Arches, just round the corner from here. Again this centred on a documentation of events that Topolski had personally witnessed, such as Bergen Belsen, the Nuremberg Trials, military parades in Red Square, the Black Panther movement and so on. And just as Jeffrey Dennis describes the Chronicles as some kind of precursor of the blog, so he also describes the Memoir of the Twentieth Century as a precursor of the modern walkaround art installation. The point is that Topolski was not just a fine draughtsman but also a great artistic innovator of his time.

11. THE RESIDENTS CHRONICLE AND EXHIBITION

The manufacture and production of their own printed lithograph Chronicle was one of the primary ambitions of the Residency, the other being to create an exhibition of all of their work, simply titled Chronicle. Both of these projects were intended to create work that sought to document and chronicle our own zeitgeist in the early twenty first century through the medium of reportage drawing.

I'm not sure how successful the Resident's Chronicle was, though interestingly it has become something of a key scene in the narrative reconstruction of the film. Far more successful was the series of three exhibitions at the Vroom Gallery and the Bargehouse in London and the F Block Gallery in Bristol. Using a short projected montage from the Parliament sequence, visitors were drawn into the gallery space, to then wander around an unconventional exhibition of drawn fragments that visually document life in contemporary London.

12. DRAWING LONDON (MARKETS, CHINATOWN AND OXFORD CIRCUS)

This overriding ambition of to present a chronicle of London took the residents to a diverse range of locations, to Housing Estates, Foodbanks, Fracking Protests, Shopping Malls, Dance Studios, to Remembrance Day, Brixton Market, the Races and so on. It also defined the mode of documentary that they were working in as an overview or cross-section of society, in the tradition of Man with a Movie Camera, the symphony films and Life in a Day, rather than to create any more singularly themed story or narrative.

Due to the inevitable restrictions of time and access, I only filmed on four days, the last occasion being a day that I suggested myself as the film maker, which was to follow the residents on a kind of audiovisual walking tour from the Studios to Oxford Circus, via Trafalgar Square, Chinatown and Picadilly Circus. This unashamed intervention into the reality that I was supposed to be representing, resulted in filmed scenes that I hoped would capture the energy and consumer frenzy of some of the most iconic locations in London.

13. REPORTAGE DRAWING : AN UNMEDIATED REALITY ?

So, although the final outcome certainly shares qualities of this documentation or overview of society, the real commonalities with documentary film lie in the live observation of real life, of how you observe, record and edit the fleeting moments of transient reality. In one of the early interviews I conducted with Gary, he said

“drawing can be quite spontaneous, there is an element of time, so it's not just capturing the decisive moment - in effect you could argue it's the indecisive moment where you're capturing a number of instances, a number of activities or episodes in one drawing. They are almost like multiple drawings, they are like multiple frames or multiple images overlaid. In effect they are in effect a little bit like animation, so I think you get more of a sense of time-based media with the drawing rather than a single frozen moment in time.”

Which I think begins to touch upon some of the innate qualities of the form, where the process of mediation occurs far more through the mindful consciousness of the artist than through any aspects of technology, which are far more prevalent in the filmmaking process.

14. EDITING AND NARRATIVE COMPRESSION

Maybe what Gary is describing, is the process of editing and selection that goes on in the individual observation of creating a single drawing. Of course, what really distinguishes the form of documentary film is the ability to compress different realities into an overarching narrative that transcends time and place through the process of creative montage.

That notion of compression, of using the editing process as a means of gathering together, selecting and emphasizing particular sequences within an overall narrative arc, to create a residual overview of the project, is perhaps the real territory or governance of the documentary film.

And in terms of the editing process, I have again been forced into a situation where I have been quite rushed, and have barely had time to do a paper edit. This has resulted in a much more organic editing style, which I think is entirely in keeping with the subject matter of the film, which at one level is akin to quite a sophisticated form of sketching.

And like a drawing, the edit has necessarily involved selecting, cutting down, repositioning, erasing and emphasising particular words, scenes, and events, not necessarily in order to represent exactly what happened, but rather to re-present what you think the audience might actually need to see.

15. EXPLORING INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Perhaps some of the project's real potentialities lie in this interdisciplinary approach to documentary, in this case exploring the relationship between drawing and film, so that a dialectical space is created where old forms are broken and new spaces can begin to emerge : rather in the same way that Topolski broke free from just being a talented draughtsman, turning his attention to printing his Chronicles and to painting the six hundred foot mural, Memoir of the Twentieth Century, which now seem like quite bold, visionary practices (although to this day largely unacknowledged by the British art establishment).

16. WORKING ACROSS DIFFERENT PLATFORMS

In the course of the project, we have collectively worked across drawing, film, sound design and composition, the web and social media, writing, presentations, exhibitions, using film and sound in exhibitions, printed broad sheets and conferences. The way that documentary film can compress the whole experience through montage and narrative design, should certainly help to make the larger project more accessible, and it'll be interesting to see how this translates into contemporary film's privileged access to audience, particularly through the online analytics of Vimeo, where you can trace audience statistics by seeing on which platforms the film has been shared and in which countries people are viewing the film from.

17. CONCLUSIONS / LESSONS LEARNED

Like I said at the beginning of the paper, I'm still in the process of production, so maybe it's a bit too soon to start talking about what 'new insights' the project has revealed through this 'process of investigation', let alone how they might be 'effectively shared'.

But I have enjoyed stepping out of the conventional paradigms of film language, working with artists who undoubtedly see the world slightly differently through their drawing and whose main technology is a pencil, particularly in the digitally obsessed era in which we are living.

I'm also adamant that continuing this kind of practice, whether it is called research or not, is a great way of improving one's teaching, particularly in terms of being able to share the experience of the creative process with one's students.

18. REPRESENTING REALITY : DISCLAIMER

Finally, I would like to add a disclaimer, that as a documentary filmmaker, a much vaunted guardian of the truth or claimer of the real, I have of course tampered with the reality in quite a few places (both in the film and I have to say in this paper as well). As we well know, real life, played out in real time, can be a ponderous affair. So I have taken the liberty of moving bits around, I have selected and emphasized and omitted various elements of what actually happened to suit my own purposes of telling the story in the best way possible : and if any of you, as members of the audience are still listening, then hopefully I might have engaged you to get to the end of another 20 minute narrative journey, hopefully creating a text that will prompt more questions than it will provide answers, but which ultimately is presented to you for you to respond in whatever way you choose. After all, it is only a representation of what actually happened.

