

# **A Spectatorship-based Approach to Undoing Blindness Stereotypes in Documentary Practice**

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own

Signed:

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## Abstract

The research is presented as an audio-visual thesis, consisting of a 62,000-word thesis and two documentary film artefacts (forty-five and forty-eight minutes, respectively). The equal ratio of theory and practice symbiotically combines the background research, written analysis and practical experimentation.

The portrayal of blind people in Western media largely conforms to stereotypical representations that oscillate between two poles: either as unfortunate, disabled and deprived, or exotic, mysterious and in touch with the supernatural. This 'othering' of blindness in documentaries is the symptom and partial cause of socio-cultural stigmatisation and 'ableist' hegemony.

Challenging this hegemony, the thesis proposes the adoption of a spectatorship-based approach to film practice. It first identifies a range of stereotypes in mainstream documentaries, revealing the overwhelming use of formulaic narratives that foreground either tragic or heroic, goal-oriented plot trajectories, and stylistic devices that objectify blind characters. These insights frame the making of my own documentary films about two blind people. The aim is the mediation of everyday experience from the characters' own perspective, with the result that the spectator experiences them as ordinary people, performing ordinary activities, albeit with *extraordinary* bodies. The films focus on everyday objects and spaces, and use narrative fragmentation to elicit a temporal sense of 'everydayness'. The methodology operates on two levels of filmic mediation: the pre-filmic, comprising my first-person encounters with the subjects, and the post-filmic that addresses the mediation of pre-filmic experience to the audience via the film. The pre-filmic level makes use of phenomenological methods; the post-filmic implements a range of methods adapted from cognitive film studies. This spectatorship-focused model offers a new way of representing and communicating the ordinary 'everyday' of the two blind characters, undoing the stereotypes that consistently 'other' members of this community.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Context

In 2004 I made *A Touch of Colour*, a 12-minute documentary about Terry, a blind painter (figure 1). Since I am neither blind, nor do I have any blind relatives or acquaintances, the motivation for that film lay in the fascination of portraying the extraordinary story of someone who, although completely blind, continues to create visual art. The plot depicts the painting process; Terry describes how his traumatic loss of sight, which brought with it increasing social isolation and caused him to abandon drawing, also forced him to reinvent his painting style. As such, it conformed with the emotive plot trajectories recommended by documentary textbooks and, for this reason, it resonated with film festivals<sup>1</sup> and fellow filmmakers. At the time, I considered disability representation and critical filmmaking to be secondary issues.



Figure 1: *A Touch of Colour* (2004)

Art historian Moshe Barasch points out that the representation of blindness in Western thought has oscillated between two binary stereotypes: deprivation and

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<sup>1</sup> The film was shown at the Picture This Film Festival (2004), The Other Film Festival (2004), Assim Vivemos Film Festival (2005) and The Disability Audiovisual Festival (2005), among others.

a presumed mysterious link with a supernatural reality (Barasch, 2001, p. 147). Since making the short documentary in 2004, I encountered these two stereotypes, albeit in different manifestations, in almost every film I saw that featured blind people. I slowly came to realise that my film was part of this unfortunate trend. Stereotypical media representations of disability are the mechanisms of boundary maintenance deployed by an *abled* culture to distinguish the *disabled* as inferior and deficient, creating societal barriers that limit interpersonal interactions between abled and disabled people, and perpetuating the subordination of this community (Haller, 2010, pp. iii–iv). The term ‘representation’ in this context is understood as the use of a shared language (written words, spoken sounds or visual images) to refer to concepts depicting people, objects and events in either the ‘real’, physical world or the world of the imagination (Hall, 1997, pp. 17–18). As Walter Lippmann (1991) argues, the former has a direct impact on the latter, for the only feeling anyone holds about a certain event or person he/she does not directly experience is a feeling induced by his/her mental image of that event (p. 13), and that mental image is in turn a response to human depictions of the real world that are (usually) assumed to be veridical (pp. 15–17). Of course, these mental images are responsible for our behaviour in the real world (p. 15), comprising, amongst others, physical interactions with, and depictions (e.g. audio-visual representations) of other people. This resulting loop thematically pervades the research design of this thesis, as representations of disability reflect, inform and are informed by the social reality of disabled people in an able-bodied world, as well as our mental constructions of that social reality.

Stereotypes are prerequisites for that mental construction. They represent “standardised conceptions of people, primarily based on an individual’s belonging to a category ... or the possession of characteristic traits symbolizing one of these categories” (Schweinitz, 2011, p. 4). In more general terms, stereotypes are essential cognitive strategies for mapping, comprehending and acting within the world around us through the simplification and classification of that perceived world. Hence, this thesis does not attempt to undo stereotypes in general, since this would mean to reprogram hard-wired human traits. The focus here is specifically on

stereotypes that relate to and have disadvantaged blind people within their social reality. The aim of this doctoral research is to identify these stereotypes in contemporary documentaries and attempt, by means of my own documentary practice, to conceptualise alternative representations that dismantle or ‘undo’ these stereotypes. In a sense, it has served as a way of redeeming myself for the stereotypical portrayal of blindness in my 2004 film, and for this reason, I again chose Terry as one of the characters, in order to undo my earlier representation of him.

The impetus for this endeavour lies in challenging one of the most inherent traits of stereotypes, their persistence, which Lippmann cogently explicates:

[Stereotypes] may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable; ... No wonder, then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. (1991, p. 95)

Examining this persistence of stereotypes in a disability discourse bears strong parallels to post-colonial discourse, both dealing with rigid socio-cultural hegemonic relations. In this regard, Homi Bhabha (1983, p. 18) deems the colonial stereotype a discursive “sign of cultural/historical/racial difference” that endures through changing historical and discursive periods – an argument identical to Moshe Barash’s in relation to representations of blindness in Western art. Bhabha identifies the reason for this endurance as the ambivalence between the stereotype existing on the one hand as an assertive, tacit and tenacious phenomenon, and on the other hand as an anxious and validation-seeking phenomenon that needs to be perpetually repeated (p. 18).

Undoing rigid blindness stereotypes requires the adoption of a critical framework for documentary practice, one that recognises that the filmmaker’s actions are informed by ‘cultural knowledge’, resulting in a cultural artefact with particular implications (Wayne, 1997, pp. 9–10) for the spectator’s “interpretations,

knowledges, experiences and modes of comparison” (Fuery, 2012, p. 85). These include the formation and confirmation of stereotypes based not only on the reception of the film text, but also on contextual factors relating to the dispositions of the spectator and their preceding knowledge. The major paradigm of this thesis is based on the proposition that filmmaking practices that potentially lead to stereotypical representations need to be approached through the critical deployment of spectatorship theories. Such theories help prevent the formation of stereotypes by gauging the spectator’s response to the final film artefact in relation to the preconceptions he/she has acquired through viewing previous films.

Mike Wayne (1997, p. 11) argues that the critical<sup>2</sup> framing of documentary practice enables the practitioner to place his/her work in relation to other cultural artefacts and hence discern connections with or departures from certain traditions of representation. Further, it illuminates the effects of textual strategies on the audience and provides the practitioner with a vocabulary that enables the understanding and communication of complex ideas through filmic form, the reflexive interrogation of the implicit assumptions underpinning formal conventions, and the conception of potential alternatives (pp. 11–12). In this respect, documentary practice can be seen as a teleological endeavour in which authorial field practices and filmic expression ultimately result in a specific audience experience. The conceptualisation of this experience needs to frame the filmmaking process. Thus, the two research questions this thesis explores are as follows:

1. How can the application of spectatorship theories establish a documentary film practice that critically addresses the received ways (audience<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the term ‘critical’ in this thesis primarily relates to the theoretical framing of film practice in relation to spectatorship – discussed in detail in Chapter Two. It does not explicitly refer to ‘critical theory’ as a school of thought, though it is loosely related to its tenets. For a detailed discourse on (documentary) film practice and critical theory, see Wayne (1997, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the thesis the terms ‘spectator’ and ‘audience’ are used interchangeably. In strictly scholarly terms, the ‘spectator’ is an “idealized, universalized subject theorised as the actual effect of the [film] text” (Shimpach, 2011, p. 69), while the ‘audience’ is “a group of people who buy tickets at the box office ... categorized according to age, sex, and socio-economic status” (Kuhn, 1984, p. 23). As Staiger (1992, p. 49) argues, the former constitutes the ‘psychological’ and the latter the ‘social’ context of film viewing. However, the inextricable connection between the psychological and social aspects of film viewing is central to this thesis, since socio-cultural stereotypes inform and are

experience) and related conceived ways (filmmaking practices) in which the portrayal of particular subjects are perpetuated in documentary film?

2. Can documentary practice, informed by spectatorship theories, assess the public perception of blind people and undo common stereotypes in the portrayal of this group?

These questions do not relate to the *subject* of my film practice (blindness) per se, but rather to the *medium* of documentary practice. The first question addresses gaps in current research; it requires a methodology that is pragmatic, malleable and inductive, in order to accommodate the second question. Hence, rather than generating new data or meta-theoretical knowledge, this research is focused first and foremost on producing a methodology for documentary practice. The second question comprises the case study used to test the methodology, but even here the data produced does not refer to blindness or disability but to its representation. The knowledge generated by this doctoral thesis is therefore praxical – that is, it can be practically applied to any subject matter that bears even a remote similarity to the case study, including other frequently stereotyped communities or topics.

Nevertheless, the subject of blindness is particularly pertinent. The attempt to represent people who experience the world in a very different way to the filmmaker and the sighted audience tests the boundaries of the proposed methodology. The filmmaker, in attempting to conceptualise narrative and aesthetic representations of blindness, is faced with a challenge: because film is an audio-visual medium, it is technically incapable of conveying touch or smell, the essential sensory means by which a blind person apprehends the world. Thus, the blind character is experienced by the spectator through the one sense the character does not possess. This raises the question of the capacity of the proposed

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informed by psychological viewing processes. This is demonstrated in Chapters Two and Four, which analyse social contexts in a constitutive relationship to psychological contexts. Thus, for my purposes, it would be problematic to draw a strict semantic boundary between the two terms. Pragmatic film theories, such as cognitive film studies, also use these terms interchangeably for exactly the same reasons. The only exception will be made when I refer in Chapter Seven to the exhibition of my films to actual viewers, when I restrict myself to the term 'audience'.

methodology to convey the character's subjective experience to the viewer without simply resorting to sound as the main aesthetic mediator. The thesis addresses this question by reassessing the notions of 'subjective experience' and 'filmic mediation'.

In terms of gauging spectatorship (audience dispositions and reception), this research operates from a filmmaker's perspective and therefore uses a hypothetical spectator to justify all its related filmmaking decisions. Neither its scope nor its objectives allow for a dedicated audience study in order to conceptualise the films or verify the desired impact of the finished artefacts; the spectatorship mentioned in the research questions is conceptual, not empirical. However, as will become apparent throughout the thesis, a conceptual approach is more efficient and pragmatic than an empirical one, not least because it is usual practice for filmmakers to base their work on the premise of a constructed audience. Hence, one of the key questions explored in this thesis concerns which theories are used to construct the audience, and how this informs the filmmaking process.

## **1.2 Components**

The thesis is composed of three artefacts: the written exegesis and two documentaries, the eponymous *Terry* (48 minutes) and *June* (45 minutes). As explained below, it is recommended to read the thesis before watching the films. In terms of viewing conditions, it is preferable to watch the films on a large screen, not on a computer or television screen. This is for two reasons: firstly, the films are primarily intended for audiences in large-screen settings (for example, festivals, community screenings or conferences); and secondly, the research paradigms address the mapping and capturing of bodies, objects and spaces in direct relation to each other, and this entails, for the most part, wide shots and a large depth of field. As the thesis includes numerous references to the spectatorial impact of the details within these shots, the apprehension of these would be considerably diminished if they were viewed on a small screen.

The two films are saved as QuickTime files on the accompanying USB flash drive. For the purpose of easy transferability and playability, the files are

compressed, using the Vimeo compression recommendations.<sup>4</sup> Although these provide a good compromise between file size and quality, compression artefacts will be moderately visible. Case studies discussed in-depth in Chapters Five and Six are identified by scene name, which corresponds to the actual scene titles used in the films, and by the scene's timecode in the QuickTime files. The USB stick also includes a PDF version of the written exegesis and the 2004 documentary, *A Touch of Colour* (12 minutes), referred to earlier.

**Terry Hopwood-Jackson**



**June Bretherton**



**Figure 2: The characters**

Terry and June, the two characters (figure 2), are both (non-congenitally) totally blind. Terry, a freelance painter, lives with his partner, Pam, in a small, crowded flat on the outskirts of Basingstoke. June, a former drama teacher, lives in a spacious house in Harwich with her partner, David, and is a freelance writer and trainer/consultant on issues affecting blind people. Terry and June are markedly different in character and temperament, especially in relation to their feelings about being blind, as well as in their social lives and everyday activities; this becomes evident through the way they are portrayed in the films. Their difference was a major reason why I chose to make two separate films – one based on each character – since juxtaposing them in the same film would have created a binary

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://vimeo.com/help/compression>

opposition between them, rendering their pre-filmic personae as comparative screen personae and considerably attenuating their individuality and particularity, which, as Chapter Four argues, are crucial to undoing stereotypes. Forcing characters into the same film through intercutting would fragment their contribution and forfeit their individual integrity (McLaughlin, 2010, p. 97). Even if there were no evident links between the characters, and they were each portrayed in a long, individual segment to prevent intercutting, the spectator would still discover relationships and infer cross-plot meanings, because the human mind is an association-driven engine, accumulating and contextualising knowledge by linking things that occur within the same time frame. Indeed, the exploitation of this ability is one of the main mechanisms of multi-character film narratives (Cutting *et al.*, 2013, pp. 85–86). Hence, when the above films are disseminated in non-academic circles, such as film festivals, they will be treated as two separate artefacts, although a detailed discussion on exhibition lies outside the scope of this thesis.

Dedicating a separate film to each character maintains their uniqueness; however, in terms of the actual research, they are in fact related case studies that enact the methodology. As such, they represent a diptych of two separate artefacts connected by a hinge – the methodology. The huge disparity between the characters tests the resilience of that hinge, and requires the deployment of a plethora of different strategies. For this reason, in an academic context, I recommend watching both films together after reading the written exegesis, or at least after reading this chapter and Chapter Four. Chapter Four provides an essential framing to the representation of blindness in documentary film – identifying current stereotypes, analysing their socio-cultural impact on blind people, and proposing concrete strategies to undo these stereotypes. Reading the chapter before watching the films reflects the inductive nature of the written exegesis in which the entire literature review and methodology are grounded in the issue of the representation of blindness; it also resembles the way I have presented the project at conferences and in academic publications.

In the context of this research, the written and the practical components are inseparable, since they frame one another. The written thesis is implicated in the

practice but is not merely illustrational, informative or supportive. Trinh T. Minh-ha encapsulates this relationship with regards to her filmmaking and her writing:

I theorize *with* my films, not *about* them [emphasis in the original]. The relationship between the verbal, the musical and the visual, just like the relationship between theory and practice is not one of illustration, description or explication. It can be one of inquiry, displacement and expansive enrichment. (Minh-ha, 2007, p. 107)

A project that is simultaneously theorised practice and practised theory relies on the concept of bricolage. Jacques Derrida (2001, p. 360) explains that the 'bricoleur' uses "the instruments he finds at his [disposal] around him, [trying] by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous". While bricolage has long been embraced by practitioners, scholars often deem it to be synonymous with cherry-picking. In order to prevent this, Joe Kincheloe (2001, p. 685) argues that the academic bricoleur needs to have a diverse understanding of disciplinary processes, recognising at the same time their parochial and restrictive dimensions. In addition, using parts of a theory in a bricolage requires the initial examination of what is discerned and discernible in relation to its suitability for the particular research questions at hand (Mason, 2011, p. 7). The inductive deployment of discernible parts from different theories needs to be complementary; that is, the particular methods should neither contradict each other nor fulfil the same practical function in a different form. Overall, the aim of the written exegesis is to formulate a bricolage methodology that is academically rigorous and coherent, yet grounded and pragmatic, demonstrating the chiasm of theory grounded in practice and practice grounded in theory.

### **1.3 Outline**

The formulation of the methodology and its application progressively crystallised as a result of my interaction with Terry and June, and the interaction between theory and practice. It has been led by experimentation in theory and practice, and has

been constantly revised and refined. In this sense, it bears similarities with ethnographic research in which data collection and analysis continually inform the research design, and “all subsequent data collection is guided strategically by the emergent theory” (Walsh, 2012, p. 248). This ‘funnel structure’, through which the methodology is gradually channelled, rejects a strictly sequential research design that “compartmentalises it into distinct stages” (p. 250). However, the *inductive actuality* of the research design is different to its *deductive presentation* in the written exegesis. Given that the objective is to produce a praxical methodology that is applicable to other research contexts and subject matters, a seemingly theory- and discourse-led structure is more efficient.

Chapter Two, ‘Documentary Practice and Spectatorship’, provides a critical review of the relevant literature. It first looks at documentary filmmaking textbooks, arguing that the lack of critical, spectatorship-focused theories results in the circulation of narrative and aesthetic formulas, which, although pedagogically efficient for teaching filmic storytelling, are prone to the sort of schematic stereotyping that has a particularly adverse effect on the representation of disability. Existing documentary study texts, therefore, offer little scope to apply spectatorship theories in order to critically frame the practical endeavour of undoing blindness stereotypes. By contrast, a cognitive approach provides this critical framing by gauging spectatorship in terms of the socio-cultural mental dispositions that inform film viewing, as well as the actual experience of the film text in terms of narrative and aesthetics. It also offers possibilities for adopting cross-disciplinary methods and exploring spectatorship in terms of momentary, embodied experiences.

Chapter Three, ‘Dispositions and Mediations’, presents the main methodology, which formulates two stages of documentary practice. The first, a content analysis, identifies spectatorship dispositions towards a particular topic such as blindness. The sampling of films for the content analysis necessarily corresponds to the target audience of my own film practice, which is identified as a ‘public’ audience as opposed to a ‘connoisseur’ or ‘amateur’ audience (Sawyer, 2006, p. 2006). The second stage involves the consideration of documentary

practice as a process of mediation on a 'pre-filmic' and a 'post-filmic' level. The pre-filmic level addresses my personal encounters with the characters; the post-filmic level addresses the spectators' collective encounter with the film text. The object of mediation at both levels is identified as the subjective experience of the characters in relation to their embodied interactions with spaces and objects. The mediation of embodied experience from the characters' point of view helps to undo stereotypes, and also results in a more homogenous spectator experience.

Chapter Four, 'The Framing of Documentary Practice', applies the first stage of the methodology to the condition of blindness. A content analysis of documentaries depicting blind characters identifies the common denominators in narrative and aesthetic stereotypes, with particular reference to the filmmaking formulas critiqued in Chapter Two. These stereotypes inadvertently use mechanisms of binary opposites, perpetuating an 'ableist' (able-bodied) hegemony that serves to ostracise the disabled community. The two main strategies for undoing these stereotypes are the focus on ordinary embodied experience within an everyday context and the focus on 'alterity', which maintains the particularity and complexity of characters without forcing them into universalised narrative schemas.

Chapter Five, 'Ordinary Materialities', and Chapter Six, 'Ordinary Temporalities', outline the variety of methods used in the actual filmmaking process. Both chapters distinguish, according to the methodology, the pre-filmic and post-filmic methods, and address the mediation of 'everydayness' and the characters' embodied experiences from two separate angles. Chapter Five focuses on Terry's and June's material experiences with ordinary objects and spaces, using the anthropological concept of 'objectification' to mediate the reversible relationship between body and objects (Tilley, 2006). Chapter Six, meanwhile, concentrates on the temporal aspect of ordinary experience as mediated through a narrative structure. Two of the main strategies deployed include the use of 'narrative fragments' to mediate incompleteness and the use of 'narrative cyclicity' to mediate the repetition of everyday rituals. Chapters Five and Six are

based on micro-detailed textual analyses of momentary aesthetics (for example, cinematography and editing) and global narrative structures such as motifs.

The conclusion in Chapter Seven reflects on the key issues of the thesis, such as the viability of hypothesising an audience and mediating ordinary, everyday experience through film. It also suggests possible avenues for disseminating the film and the thesis, pinpointing institutional channels, as well as areas for further academic research.

This strong focus on spectatorship limits the need and the space in which to discuss the filmmaking process from an authorial perspective.<sup>5</sup> Thus, issues of research and production are only addressed if they have implications for the spectatorial experience, as in the case of the pre-filmic practice of ‘database filmmaking’, which leads to narrative fragmentation. The same holds for authorship, which is only examined in particular instances where aesthetic and narrative strategies convey my presence to the spectator through ‘deep reflexivity’ (MacDougall, 1998) and ‘political reflexivity’ (Nichols, 2001). Similarly, ethical issues are only referred to if they arise for the spectator, as is the case for the ‘back shot’ examples and narrative beginnings. Equally, my relationship to Terry and June, as well as various aspects of their lives, are not mentioned unless they are revealed to the viewer through the film text or have direct implications for the aesthetic and narrative choices, such as the filmmaking motif in Terry’s film. This almost exclusive focus on spectatorship is tailored to the two research questions, whose remit is the formation and undoing of stereotypes in the spectator, not the filmmaker. Nevertheless, the stereotypical representations identified in Chapter Four also relate to my own preconceptions prior to this study, as my 2004 documentary about Terry demonstrates. As such, the first part of Chapter Four represents a quasi-self-reflexive endeavour.

Ultimately, I undertook this research in order to widen my horizons – both as a practitioner and as a film lecturer in the higher education sector – in relation to the reception and socio-cultural implications of my practice and to the pedagogical

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<sup>5</sup> Other doctoral theses, such as those of Butler (2009), Dowmunt (2010), Kerrigan (2011) and Daniels (2014), already present excellent explorations of the authorial process of documentary filmmaking.

task of guiding students towards a similar awareness of their own practice. I also intended to extend the boundaries of my knowledge as a film scholar on the subject of spectatorship across several disciplines, including cognitive film studies, documentary studies and disability studies, in particular. However, whether in pedagogical, academic or practice terms, this research is a de facto activist pursuit, since it aims to contribute to the deconstruction of disability stereotypes and ableist hegemonies. Unfortunately, analysing the results of this pursuit is beyond the remit of this thesis; however, it will inform future research.

## Chapter Two: Documentary Practice and Spectatorship

### 2.1 Introduction

The following chapter surveys the relevant literature in light of my first research question: How can the application of spectatorship theories establish a documentary film practice that critically addresses the received ways (audience experience) and related conceived ways (filmmaking) in which particular subjects are consistently portrayed in documentary film?

The chapter starts with an examination of the most popular textbooks on documentary film practice, since this type of literature is responsible for the way practitioners deploy narrative and aesthetic formulas in their films. The literature's disregard of spectatorship theories leads to the formation and perpetuation of schematic narrative formulas that result in the formation and perpetuation of preconceived ideas (including stereotypes) in the spectator. These formulas are then employed by filmmakers because they conform in turn to audience expectations. The chapter relates the search for a critical spectatorship approach that would address such preconceived ideas and thus enable the conception of a film practice aimed at reconfiguring audience dispositions. It briefly highlights the omissions in the documentary studies literature before outlining the reasons why cognitive theory is the most appropriate tool for the essential task of critically framing documentary practice.

The theoretical underpinning of the methodology deployed in this research, therefore, falls broadly into two fields, both of which are examined here: documentary practice and cognitive film theory. Their intersection may still be a largely unexplored locus, but it is one that allows a grounded, pragmatic and interdisciplinary bricolage approach, incorporating such disciplines as social cognition, anthropology and disability studies, as the later practice chapters demonstrate.

## 2.2 Documentary and spectatorship

### 2.2.1 Documentary practice textbooks

*This handbook smuggles in a little film theory here and there.  
Apologies in advance!*

The inclusion of any theory in filmmaking textbooks has always been regarded as problematic, as the above quotation from Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor (1997, p. 3) shows. The quote is of course ironic; the authors go on to criticise documentary filmmaking manuals for being prescriptive and favouring the *how* rather than the *why* (p. 3). A de-theorised, purely empirical approach to practice is potentially deceitful as it undermines perspective and differentiation, “often contributing to a retreat from critical engagement” (Petrie and Stoneman, 2014, p. 286). However, the incorporation of theory into documentary practice is marked by a recurrent paradox: the filmmaking community tends to praise the value of theory and highlight its necessity, while simultaneously alleging that its apparently abstract nature is both a distraction and a stumbling block to what should be an intuitive, artistic and pragmatic filmmaking process. Undoubtedly, some theories are more suitable to film practice than others, but even these are usually frowned upon or distilled to their bare minimum when it comes to teaching or practising filmmaking. Theory is dismissed as too “ethereal, speculative, abstract or indefinite”, an attitude that derives from the filmmaker’s faith in the tangible and empirical nature of his/her practice (Petrie and Stoneman, 2014, p. 286). Indeed, for Brian Winston this resentment is mutual and affects aspiring filmmakers:

The practitioners pour scorn on the scholars and hold their analyses to be incomprehensible irrelevances. The academy barely tolerates practitioners and thinks their more abstract musings are inadequate inanities. And the students<sup>[6]</sup>, ‘great artists’ in the making, are in the middle and, all too often, hostile to traditional academic demands and concerns. (Winston, 2012, p. 196)

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<sup>6</sup> In distinction to Winston, this chapter understands the term ‘student’ to refer to anyone who is an aspiring filmmaker and not simply to those studying filmmaking in an academic institution. Thus, a student is anyone who is likely to learn filmmaking through consulting the textbooks.

This mutual resentment accounts for the gaps in both documentary practice and documentary studies literature, and underlines the necessity to build bridges between both camps, especially in relation to the objective of contributing to socio-cultural awareness through undoing disability stereotypes in film, the formation of which can be traced back to the influence of documentary filmmaking textbooks.

Textbooks explain the theory of the craft and are seen as separate from either handbooks, which focus purely on technical knowledge, or practitioner interviews or essays, which recount biographical anecdotes and subjective preferences (Orpen, 2003, pp. 10–11). Wayne (1997, pp. 9–10) explains that ‘technical knowledge’ provides the competence necessary to operate technical equipment and organise the logistics of filmmaking, while ‘cultural knowledge’ comprises customs that determine how this technical knowledge is mobilised in particular ways to produce the final film artefact. Documentary textbooks represent the main interface between these two types of knowledge, whereby cultural knowledge operates implicitly rather than reflexively, leaving the practitioner oblivious to the fact that this knowledge, and the resulting representations, are culturally constructed and may have negative social consequences.

The most popular textbooks, which are the recommended reading on both the academic and non-academic courses I have taught on,<sup>7</sup> are *Documentaries: And how to Make Them* (Glynne, 2008), *Directing the Documentary* (Rabiger, 2004), *Documentary Storytelling* (Bernard, 2007), *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice* (de Jong *et al.*, 2012) and *Documentary Editing* (Everett, 2010). These books have two primary aims: the successful acquisition of skills that streamline the production process and the accomplishment of a maximum audience impact that would render the finished film either commercially successful or ‘critically acclaimed’. Both of these aims address strategies of storytelling through aesthetics and narrative structuring, but the lack of any reference to spectatorship theories

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<sup>7</sup> These courses are as follows: BA in Film at the University of South Wales; BA in Film Production at the University of West London; BA in Television Production at Middlesex University; MA in Screen Documentary at Goldsmiths, University of London; Documentary Production at the London Academy of Film, Media and TV; and Documentary Filmmaking at Open City.

results in a variety of uncritical and normative assumptions about how the spectator experiences or interprets film texts.

### *Aesthetics and spectatorship*

Andy Glynne (2008, p. 137) reflects the dominance of aesthetic considerations in this literature when he presents the rule-of-thirds as an essential requisite for cinematographic composition, arguing that it is more aesthetically pleasing if points of interest are placed on one of the four intersections of imaginary lines (for example, if eyes are placed on the upper intersections), and that breaking this rule (for example, by centring a subject) results in the audience perceiving it as unaesthetic and amateurish. Another example is Michael Rabiger's (2004, pp. 149–150) vivid explanation of the 180-degree rule and how adherence to it places the spectator into the pro-filmic event as a passive observer. Although the rule-of-thirds, unlike the 180-degree rule, is far more of a Western convention than the emulation of human perception, both are simple and efficient, and both pre-determine a normative spectator response. As all textbooks are aimed at beginners, these sorts of simple formulas would be didactically marred by the introduction of a deeper theoretical framework.

However, the lack (and even rejection) of alternatives that would break these rules represents a *modus operandi* that discourages the consideration of alternative aesthetic representations. For example, deviating from the rule-of-thirds by centring a face through framing may be aesthetically pleasing and even thematically relevant, as Abbas Kiarostami's documentary *Homework* (1989) demonstrates (figure 3). The framing of the pupils is strongly linked to Kiarostami's self-reflexive, interrogative interview technique, and the centrality of the face mediates the experience of being figuratively framed and vulnerable, since the lack of lead room minimises the character's bodily action affordances. A more extreme example is Erroll Morris's *Fog of War* (2004), which breaks not only the rule-of-thirds but also the rule that framing should be parallel to lines within the space (figure 4). Morris's aim is to aesthetically mediate the film's major themes of uncertainty, memory and manipulation by deliberately breaking conventions.



Figure 3: *Homework* (1989)



Figure 4: *Fog of War* (2004)

Of course, the inclusion of examples that break the rules within a textbook dedicated to imparting the basics of filmmaking would be impractical and counter-productive, diluting its efficacy and distracting students from acquiring and practising conventional skills before experimenting with alternatives. Providing short, simple and efficient conventions is one of the major strength of these texts, as students can quickly memorise these conventions and spontaneously apply them in the field. However, this pedagogically efficient yet normative tactic is problematic when it comes to a critical consideration of spectator impact, especially if applied to a more complex configuration of aesthetic elements. One example is Erik Knudsen's (de Jong *et al.*, 2012, pp. 136–140) close reading of the documentary *Anything Can Happen* (1995) by Marcel Lozinski (figure 5). Lozinski films his young son randomly approaching elderly strangers in a park and starting casual conversations on different topics. Knudsen analyses the film in terms of a spectatorially perceived

diegesis in which the narrator has a strong presence through the use of long lenses and the out-of-focus foliage on screen, which contrasts with the clarity of the heard dialogue. He highlights the evocative juxtaposition between the distant camera perspective and the proximal auditory sharpness of the dialogue, which metaphorically relates to the boy's short encounter with the elderly people, who are "abandoned and lonely, living with their memories and regrets, waiting to die" (p. 140).



Figure 5: *Anything Can Happen* (1995)

Whilst Knudsen acknowledges that the elderly people were most likely oblivious to the fact that they were being filmed, he does not raise any ethical issues, focusing instead on the diegetic dialogue between the boy and the characters. Given the overt camera distance and the fact that it is documentary not fiction, the audience is likely to question the filmmaker's voyeuristic point of view and ask a range of ethical questions: Was consent given? Were the people aware they were being filmed? Were they aware their voices were being recorded by the (most likely hidden) microphone the boy was wearing? Would they have responded differently to the more intimate and uncomfortable questions had they known they were being recorded? Neither does Knudsen discuss issues of representation, such as the stereotypical depiction of elderly people as being lonely, miserable, indulging in memories and spending their lives sitting on park benches.

That being said, Knudsen's close reading is rare and commendable, as none of the other textbooks analyse aesthetic elements in such depth. His comprehensive

and plausible reading links character and themes to aesthetics and narrative structure, and this benefits students' conceptual understanding of the interaction of a multitude of aesthetic elements. To a certain degree, it also encourages students to consciously make choices about micro-aesthetic filming elements, such as focal length, which paradigmatically involves a contextualisation of one choice within a range of alternative choices. However, without a critical consideration of spectatorship (for example, in terms of possible reactions to a particular form of visual representation), these kinds of choices remain purely based on formalist theories that form the basis of Knudsen's reading. Formalist theories place the focus on aesthetic experience and narrative comprehension in a bottom-up manner, largely disregarding top-down processes, such as the socio-cultural framing of film viewing. In addition, such approaches are based on textual readings rather than spectatorship models. As Vivian Sobchack (1992, p. 16) explains, formalists assume that expression and meaning are located in the text, and that the text somehow transcends its origin in the real world with real people, such as the characters in the documentary and its spectators; this "transcendental idealism" regards the film as "expression-in-itself – subjectivity freed from worldly constraint".

Still, Wilma de Jong, Erik Knudsen and Jerry Rothwell's *Creative Documentary* (2012) has the most theoretical framing compared with all other practice textbooks, and is (comparatively) the most critical and efficient text when it comes to amalgamating theory and practice. Its numerous citations of key texts on theory may prompt the practitioner to undertake additional reading and foster critical thinking that questions normative methods. However, in terms of critically considering spectatorship, as the example of Knudsen's critique of *Anything Can Happen* (1995) and the following discussion on narrative show, there are limits in all textbooks. This means that higher-education lecturers who run documentary practice modules must either add texts on theory to their course reading lists or rely on separate modules on documentary theory (usually run simultaneously with the practice modules). The result is that students tentatively adopt critical theory when writing essays and reflective analyses but rarely use it to frame their films, a fact

confirmed by Winston (2012) when addressing students' aversion to theory (cited above).<sup>8</sup>

Textbooks are indispensable teaching and learning tools that provide the norms of professional practice, and I use them extensively in my own teaching and film practice. However, the implicit assumptions about spectatorship in these texts may inadvertently lead to unsolicited audience experiences, which, in the best case scenario, may considerably diverge from the filmmaker's intentions, and in the worst, may reinforce preconceived ideas by perpetuating the use of the same formulas.

### *Narrative, spectatorship and folk psychology*

In terms of teaching audio-visual aesthetics, documentary textbooks are rather sparse when compared with textbooks on fiction filmmaking. It appears that the common assumption about the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of documentary production deters authors from engaging more deeply with film language. Another related common assumption is that documentaries are 'made' in postproduction as it is only there that the author has full control over the rushes. Hence, when it comes to narrative structuring, textbooks present intricate plot recipes that are reasonably accurate in gauging audience impact, especially in eliciting emotional empathy for screen characters; however, the lack of critical framing<sup>9</sup> means there is a high risk that these recipes will perpetuate general stereotypes.

Sheila Curran Bernard (2007, p. 27) presents the main aim of documentary narratives as "telling a story for greatest emotional impact and audience participation". Similarly, Rabiger (2004, p. 135) declares that "documentary should act on our hearts, not on our minds alone ... It exists not just to inform us about something but to change how we feel about it too." These emotions are

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion on how to address the conundrum of the practice-theory divide in higher education curricula, see Wayne (2003) and Houtman *et al.* (2014)

<sup>9</sup> One notable exception is Searle Kochberg's *Introduction to Documentary Production* (2002), which touches on discussions of representation and authorship in the chapter entitled 'Narrative Intent'. Unfortunately, given that the book has not been revised since 2002, which means that the sections on technical knowledge are out of date, it is rarely used on practice courses.

predominantly evoked through character-centred narratives that make the audience “draw difficult conclusions about motives and responsibilities, and takes us along as accomplices in a painful quest for truth” (p. 11). The audience should emotionally experience the tension between the character’s aims and the obstacles they face, developing empathy for the character (de Jong *et al.*, 2012, p. 123). According to Karen Everett (2010, pp. 68–87), a plot journey has to start with a life-altering conflict that upsets the character’s world at the beginning of a narrative, guaranteeing that the audience empathises with the character and feels motivated to follow him/her through their hard journey towards a final denouement. Evidently, all textbooks link the idea of an engaging and successful narrative to the audience’s emotional investment in three-act plot structures that follow characters on a metaphorical journey, pursuing their goals in the face of successive obstacles and dealing with conflict-laden predicaments.

Interestingly, de Jong *et al.* (2012) use the rare strategy of introducing alternative narrative structuring methodologies, such as inductive and deductive, essayistic, classical and transcendental narratives. This juxtaposition of alternatives does indeed challenge implicit narrative assumptions, and may well trigger a critical consideration of representational issues. Unfortunately, the more experimental narrative forms are only briefly mentioned as part of a larger taxonomy. Only Knudsen’s chapter on transcendental narrative offers a comprehensive counterpoint to the classical narrative trajectory cited above in that it suggests that narrative events can equally be states that reflect the character’s psyche and add to the audience’s progressive psychological engagement with the characters, leaving aside the classical elements of conflict, obstacles and goal-driven journey (pp. 132-135). Still, as with the classical narrative structure, the transcendental narrative places a strong emphasis on the need for the audience to empathise with the characters and fully understand (or experience) their motivations and behaviour within a three-act plot depicting their psychological development.

The narrative strategies found in these textbooks are based on assumptions found in ‘folk psychology’. The disciplines of the philosophy of mind and cognitive science use this term to denote our hard-wired cognitive drive to the unreflective

use of everyday knowledge “to predict and explain the behaviour of others” (Currie, 2004, p. 108). This universal human urge to make sense of the thoughts, feelings and actions of others manifests itself in the construction of narratives (Hutto, 2007, p. 45), and film is one of the cultural artefacts that shape and are shaped by this inbuilt narrative practice.<sup>10</sup> Carl Plantinga (2011, p. 30) calls this the ‘filmmaker-audience loop’. This term describes the shared assumptions filmmakers and spectators hold about human psychology and behaviour – assumptions that, on the one hand, enable an audience to understand character-led narratives, and on the other, enable filmmakers to predict audience response. There is an inextricable connection between filmmaking practice and viewing practice in so far as the spectator and the filmmaker approach the film artefact with similar sorts of knowledge, interpretations and experiences.

The folk-psychological plots prescribed in textbooks take the form of dynamic trajectories in which each of a character’s moves towards attaining a goal triggers a new action, signified by a cut, a particular shift in visual aesthetics or a particular plot direction, that initiates a new state of being. These constant shifts elicit spectatorial empathy with the character on two levels. Firstly, each plot shift presents a novel situation in which the character and the audience have to orient themselves. This, according to Plantinga (2009a, p. 22), represents one of the key pleasures of watching a film. Secondly, a shift in situation creates specific emotions in the character and the viewer, as an emotion is a “change in action readiness as a result of the subject’s appraisal of the situation or event” (Tan, 1996, p. 46).

In order to naturalise character behaviour and motivations in a variety of circumstances, the textbooks (see, for example, Everett, 2010, p. 91) recommend a clear exposition of character traits and constellations through the establishment of character archetypes. The most popular constellation of these ‘stock characters’ is the binary of protagonist-antagonist, whereby the antagonist can represent either a literal obstacle (as with Eugène Terre’Blanche in Nick Broomfield’s 1991 film, *The Leader, His Driver and the Driver’s Wife*) or a symbolic obstacle (such as Charlton

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of how folk psychology operates in both real life and in film, see Persson (2003, pp. 161–246).

Heston, who stands for the US gun lobby in Michael Moore's 2002 *Bowling for Columbine*) to the character's journey (Bernard, 2007, pp. 25–26; de Jong *et al.*, 2012, pp. 122–123).

James Polichak and Richard Gerrig (2002, p. 72) point out that, from a social cognition perspective, the audience's active responses to films involve the same cognitive processes as their responses to real-life situations. Constantly experiencing the same stock characters and similar narrative structures can shape the audience's long-term mental representations and even change their general beliefs (p. 92). Familiarity with narrative formulas, and the general beliefs these sustain or inculcate, are integral parts of the human folk psychology absorbed by spectators and filmmakers alike, and inform the cognitive formation of social schemas. These are "organised collections of information stored in memory and based on past experience" and are composed of role and event schemas (Pennington, 2000, p. 69) – role schemas determine our expectations of people's behaviour in a particular situation, while event schemas inform our expectations in relation to particular circumstances or places (pp. 72-73).

Social schemas therefore provide our brain with clear-cut mental scripts that enable us to quickly evaluate and experience social life, and they operate in the same way with a film's narrative (Bondebjerg, 1994; Persson, 2003; Bordwell, 2008). In essence, film narratives inform and are informed by our values, beliefs, experiences and knowledge, and documentary textbooks are excellent repositories of narrative schemas that reflect social schemas, which in turn determine our perceptions and actions. It is not surprising that the textbooks selected as examples in this chapter hold the most popular appeal for practitioners, lecturers and students because of their successful folk-psychological resonance with authors, filmmakers and audiences. However, from a critical perspective, the strength of their folk-psychological approach is also their major flaw.

### *Folk psychology and stereotyping*

The constant exposure to schematic narratives has fossilised cognitive schemas to the extent that they have become resistant to change, resulting in strong pressure to maintain the status quo (Pennington, 2000, p. 75). As cognitive schemas simplify the information we process in order to produce spontaneous judgements, deliberate, critical thinking takes place only on rare occasions (pp. 79-80). Much of our mental processing has been relegated by habit, routine and evolution to the subconscious. This means that we tend to perceive, without question, our everyday experiences of people, things and events as immediate and truthful (Moskowitz, 2005, p. 69). This effect, known as 'phenomenal immediacy', occurs especially in (folk-psychological) documentary narratives that leave no space for doubt or ambiguity as to role or event schemas, but the implicit exploitation of this tendency to spontaneous judgement is also mirrored by mainstream<sup>11</sup> filmmakers, who uncritically and unreflexively use storytelling conventions without considering their socio-cultural impact on spectatorship.

In terms of the cognitive attributes, schemas are identical to Walter Lippmann's concept of stereotypes discussed previously, both being essential, hard-wired brain mechanisms. However, the stereotype specifically relates to our perception of and interaction with actual people, whether individuals or collectives (see Lippmann, 1991; Moskowitz, 2005; Dyer, 2006; Schweinitz, 2011). Being the stereotype's hypernym, the schema describes the cognitive classification of information in general, which can include prevalent narrative and aesthetic formulas. The focus of this thesis is strictly on schemas and stereotypes that operate within hegemonic representation systems in relation to blindness - the term 'stereotype' will henceforth be used in this particular context. The key principle for examining hegemonic stereotypes is Jörg Schweinitz's (2011, p. 48) distinction between two inter-related concepts of stereotyping: the social-science

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<sup>11</sup> In this thesis, the term 'mainstream' denotes the common reception of films based on the predominant narrative and aesthetic conventions. As such, it refers to the reception of normative film texts that results in largely homogenous spectator experiences; it does not address production practices, exhibition modes or economic factors, which lie beyond the scope of this thesis.

concept relates to the perception of individuals or collectives from ‘other’<sup>12</sup> social or cultural groups, such as homosexuals, the disabled, housewives or ethnic minorities, which guides our everyday attitudes and behaviour; the narrative concept comprises, for example, the imaginary narrative and aesthetic construct of characters, as dictated by genre conventions. Although Schweinitz is only referring to fiction film when he points out that these concepts often intertwine, the fact that documentary generally references the real world means that their relationship is less an intertwining than a constitutive one,<sup>13</sup> as manifest in Plantinga’s (2011) filmmaker-audience loop (mentioned above). Stereotypical narrative formulas form and are formed by social stereotypes, which has profound social and ethical implications for the documentary filmmaking process.

Still, Schweinitz’s distinction between the two concepts is methodologically invaluable, since it is only through an examination of existing narrative stereotypes that we can draw conclusions about social stereotypes and the hegemonic dispositions that determine who proposes, enforces and maintains them within a society (Dyer, 2000, p. 248). Chapter Four analyses how documentaries about blind people employ folk-psychological storytelling formulas, which (inadvertently) generate social stereotypes that continue to have a detrimental effect on the social awareness of blindness. This insight allows for the conceptualisation of alternative representations, potentially leading to a reconfiguration of social stereotypes.

It is worth mentioning here that only two authors of standard filmmaking textbooks raise the issue of representation and stereotyping: Rabiger (2004, pp. 108–111) provides a brief outline and checklist of representational issues, and de Jong *et al.* (2012, p. 103) describe Bill Nichols’s reflexive documentary mode and its exposition of the act of representation to the audience. Unfortunately, in both cases, the discussion remains speculative and is mostly divorced from the more

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<sup>12</sup> The term ‘other’ (and related derivatives like ‘otherness’) is used in this thesis to address social or cultural groups that are perceived as ‘aberrant’ according to mainstream Western norms, and who are therefore prone to hegemonic oppression, partly through stereotyping, as is often the case with the disabled (see, for example, Said, 1979; Schillmeier, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Schweinitz’s dichotomy is reminiscent of Staiger’s distinction of the social context (the ‘audience’) and the psychological context (the ‘spectator’) of film viewing (see footnote 3).

practice-based chapters that recommend the sort of folk-psychological narrative techniques that help produce such stereotyping in the first place.

Nevertheless, the use of folk-psychological storytelling formulas must not be demonised. On the contrary, folk psychology is the most efficient method of creating an interface between the film text and the audience; it is also a natural phenomenon, an essential part of our being, which explains the popularity of these textbooks and the success of films that apply the prescribed formulas. Hence, filmmakers, such as myself, who target a public, mainstream audience must embrace but critically understand folk-psychological mechanisms in film practice and spectatorship. In order to do so, Plantinga (2011, p. 45) suggests supplementing these mechanisms with scientific and philosophical spectatorship theories. Framing folk-psychological filmmaking conventions with a rigorous spectatorship theory enables the filmmaker to create films that resonate with a mainstream audience and, at the same time, gauge spectatorship in relation to the generation or reconfiguration of stereotypes.

### **2.2.2 Documentary studies texts**

While traditional documentary studies do contain some notable attempts to explore spectatorship, these are relatively limited. For instance, Michael Renov's (1993, p. 22) taxonomy of documentary construction, function and effect identifies four modalities in relation to 'desire': to record, persuade, analyse and express. Renov mentions spectatorship when focusing on ontological issues concerning the documentary image and the role of the filmmaker, but as he does not discuss any particular spectatorship model, it is unclear whether he wants to argue that the filmmaker's desire is somehow transcendently mediated to the spectator, or whether he is strictly referring to authorship.

Paul Ward (2005), on the other hand, focuses exclusively on spectatorship in relation to three different documentary genres: historical, comedy and animation. Unfortunately, most of his analyses are textual readings, and the pre-dispositional schemas he examines are mainly related to formalistic genre typologies rather than

socio-cultural representations. Furthermore, because of his strong emphasis on genres and narrative, he falls short on close readings that link aesthetic elements to spectatorship.

Thomas Austin's (2007) approach to spectatorship is through audience research, which certainly gives a clearer picture of the socio-cultural contexts of film viewing. However, his predominant reliance on empirical data, amalgamated with ideas from film studies, sociology and cultural studies, leaves little room for theorising a spectator in relation to experiential narrative and aesthetic elements – the only way that my film practice can gauge spectatorship, as a dedicated audience research study is not feasible within the confines of this research.

By contrast, Belinda Smail (2010, p. 8) does theorise a spectator in relation to the social context of emotions, and recognises “a need to grasp the particularity of historical contextualisation and its impact on textual production and circulation”. However, for my thesis, the prototypical emotions she establishes by using psychoanalytic paradigms neglect the “dynamic ebb and flow of feelings that characterises viewers’ experiences” (Campbell, 2011), and Smail’s declared exclusion of cognitive models (2010, pp. 7–8) prevents her from rigorously examining spectatorial processes, such as sensory experience, narrative comprehension and, of course, the relation between socio-cultural and narrative schemas. Furthermore, there is repeated confusion over whose emotions she is referencing, and whether the filmmaker’s or the screen character’s emotions are automatically transferred to the spectator.

Jane Chapman’s *Issues in Contemporary Documentary* (2009) is in principle a very good addition to the filmmaking textbook canon. Being a documentary studies textbook (rather than a scholar ‘text’ with a specific theoretical scope as is the literature mentioned above), it comprises a wide range of pragmatic theories concerning such subjects as authorship, representation and reflexivity, accompanied by close readings of case studies, although these readings refer to narrative themes, authorship and institutions rather than actual spectatorship. Due to the usual necessary compression of textbooks, Chapman’s chapter dedicated to ‘audiences’, however, leaves little scope to elaborate on the theories she presents,

and her range of spectatorship models is limited to the fields of audience research, cultural studies, media platforms, social activism, political conditions and epistemology – all of which are models that do not theorise a spectator in the manner my research questions require.

That being said, the examples cited above which touch on spectatorship represent a minority voice within the documentary studies canon. As Austin (2007, p. 2) points out, whereas textual form, address, ethical concerns and industrial contexts have been widely studied, studies on actual audience perspectives remain woefully underrepresented. Scholars have frequently approached spectatorship through the opaque lens of forms of authorial address, such as subjectivity (Renov, 2004), performativity (Bruzzi, 2006), documentary types/genres (Nichols, 2001) and constructed realities (Winston, 2008). Spectatorship approaches in the form of audience research or audience reception are scarce.

This lacuna may be due to two types of conflation in documentary studies. Firstly, like the aforementioned formalist approaches predominant in filmmaking textbooks, documentary studies texts, such as Renov (1993), Ward (2005) and Smail (2010), synthesise *expression* and *perception*, which results in what Sobchack (1992, pp. 16–17) calls a “critical rhetoric, charging cinematic communication with some equivalent to sophistry”. Secondly, as John Corner (2008, p. 23) suggests, there is a repeated scholarly neglect to differentiate between arguments concerning the documentary’s indexical *origination*, which address the ontology of the indexical image in terms of its filmic construction, and those regarding its formal *organisation*, which focus on the perceptual dimension of that filmic construction (this can be observed in, for example, Bruzzi (2006), Nichols (2001), Winston (2008) and Baron (2014), and in numerous contributions in Grant and Sloniowski’s (1998) edited work).

In summary, then, the theorisation of documentary practice through spectatorship could open new paths for documentary scholars, especially by addressing these two conflations. For instance, this thesis overtly distinguishes between expression and reception, focusing on the latter, but it also deliberately

bypasses issues of indexical origination in order to focus on formal organisation in relation to spectatorship.

## **2.3 Cognitive film theory**

### **2.3.1 Cognitive film theory and documentary practice**

The field of cognitive film theory offers an approach that appears the most useful for an exploration of the issues raised in my research questions. For example, filmmaker and academic, Henry Breitrose (n.d., p. 6), who argues for the adoption of a cognitive approach to documentary practice, demonstrates that cognitive theory accounts for how people “make sense of the world” and can therefore be used to determine how the structure of a documentary mediates between the content and the presumed audience. Cognitive models, by linking audience reception to the formal elements of the film, can engage the audience and provide the filmmaker with some confidence in the process (p. 5). This confidence arises from the theoretical framing practice that Wayne (1997, p. 12) proposes, which facilitates the filmmaker’s understanding and the communication of complex ideas through film form, and allows the reflexive interrogation of implicit formal and socio-cultural assumptions.

Breitrose’s premise, however, is shaped by his pedagogical purpose: to educate conventional, mainstream documentary practitioners. Thus, in a structuralist-formalist fashion, he somewhat misleadingly singles out narrative structure as cognitive film theory’s main asset, dismissing aesthetics, for example. His emphasis on a universal audience response based on folk-psychological narratives is reminiscent of the themes of the documentary textbooks, albeit with a more theoretical approach, and is not sufficiently rigorous or critical. Fortunately, Breitrose does acknowledge the socio-cultural and subjective framing of authorship and spectatorship, and encourages documentary students to consider “his or her intentions and the intentional systems of the audience, as well as the background of knowledge and abilities that the audience brings to the screen” (n.d., p. 12). As such, his short text, although too speculative and conforming too much to

mainstream filmmaking tropes, provides the impetus for a cognitive spectatorship-focused approach to documentary practice.

### 2.3.2 Cognitive film theory and documentary spectatorship

There has been very little convergence between documentary practice and studies and cognitive film theory. Documentary scholars deem cognitive models too limited. This is due to their attempt to establish scientific and normative models that account for a hardwired audience reception based on hypothesising a universal body of spectators, thus neglecting socio-cultural and historical framings (for example, Smaill, 2010, p. 8). In light of the current body of work in cognitive film studies, this argument is indeed justified. Although cognitive film scholars do marginally acknowledge the importance of social, cultural and historical contexts (for example, Peterson, 1996; Plantinga, 2011) rigorous studies have been scarce at best.<sup>14</sup>

Cognitive film scholars have also largely failed to focus on documentary, favouring fiction instead. This may have two causes. Firstly, cognitive film theory was established in the 1990s arguably as an antithesis to the post-structuralist, Marxist, psychoanalytic-semiological *Screen* tradition (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996; Tan, 1996; Plantinga and Smith, 1999). Given that the '*Screen* scholars' focused mainly on fiction, it was logical that the cognitivists offered their alternative theories in the same territory – where they continue to remain today. Secondly, the popularity of mainstream fiction amongst the public has overshadowed that of documentary. Given that one of the cognitivists' main aims is to examine the popularity of mainstream films through an analysis of prototypical narratives, in order to understand our most common movie experience (Shimamura, 2013, p. 4), it is therefore natural that the focus on documentary has not been a priority. For instance, in *Cognitive Media Theory* (Nannicelli and Taberham, 2014), only Ed Tan's chapter touches on documentary; even then, he merely uses nature documentary and fashion show reportage as comparative case studies to illustrate his argument

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<sup>14</sup> Notable exceptions, albeit for fiction film spectatorship, include Barratt (2014) and Coëgnarts and Kravanja (2015).

that they elicit emotionally detached audience responses in contrast to the engaged responses to fiction films. Meanwhile, in *Psychocinematics – Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, Arthur Shimamura (2013, p. 21) even declares the redundancy of discussing documentary, stating that “it is noteworthy to point out that nonfiction films (i.e., documentaries) generally adhere to the same cognitive and aesthetic features as will be described for fictional narratives”.

The few cognitive approaches to documentary can be broadly divided into three strands: neo-formalist (Plantinga, 1997), semiotic (Currie, 1999; Ponech, 1999; Carroll, 2003) and pragmatic (Bondebjerg, 1994; Eitzen, 1995; Smith, 2007). The neo-formalist and semiotic strands offer thorough examinations of documentary texts in relation to narrative structure and perspective, the nature of documentary compared with fiction, and authorial intentionality. For instance, working in the neo-formalist tradition established by David Bordwell, Plantinga (1997) establishes an intricate classification that delineates, among other things, different narrative voices such as the ‘formal’ voice, which adopts an epistemically authoritative position to make categorical claims about the world (pp. 110-111), and the ‘open’ voice, which is epistemically hesitant, thus allowing for a degree of reflexivity and interpretation (pp. 115-116), a distinction reminiscent of Umberto Eco’s (1979) ‘close-open text’ model. Noël Carroll (2003), meanwhile, examines the question of authorial intentionality in documentary film, which theorises an audience response based on intentional ‘indexing’ by either the filmmaker or the film text. Indexing involves the use of textual, contextual and institutional cues to distinguish documentary from fiction, raising different expectations in the spectator. Trevor Ponech (1999), on the other hand, attributes authorial intentionality predominantly to the text, not the viewer’s experience.

These neo-formalist and semiotic models represent seminal landmarks in the scant documentary discourse in cognitive film studies, but they are only marginally relevant to this project’s research, partly because they do not take into account predispositional socio-cultural schemas in the viewer, and partly as they do not focus on actual spectatorial film experience, instead exploring either the rhetorical dimension of the film text or the indexical relationship between the film

text and the world. The pragmatic strand, which is the most promising for documentary practice but the least scholarly developed, consisting of a few short texts, will be discussed further below.

Despite Breitrose's seminal attempt to align documentary practice and cognitive theory (albeit purely for the benefit of filmmakers, not scholars), there is a profound lack of practice-based cognitive research in the field of filmmaking. The only practice-based cognitive research is to be found in empirical studies that measure audience responses during audio-visual viewings (see, for example, Vo *et al.*, 2012; Heimann *et al.*, 2014; Cutting and Armstrong, 2016). These studies use cognitive theory as an analytical tool rather than a synthesising, reverse-engineering tool that enables the filmmaker to gauge audience experience, as is my intention.<sup>15</sup> The reason for this gap in the literature probably lies in the filmmaker-audience-loop phenomenon, which may prompt cognitive scholars and practitioners to assume that cognitive models already mirror filmmaking practices, deeming the demonstration of their practical application redundant. Sheena Rogers observes:

[F]ilmmakers could be said to be conducting experiments in cognitive science and their first experimental participants are themselves. Many hours in the cutting room are the equivalent of many hours in the laboratory with the filmmaker as both experimenter and as participant. The resulting discoveries are deployed in order to manipulate our experience ... The discoveries of filmmakers, editors in particular, predate the recent formalizations of cognitive science but the parallels are many. (Rogers, 2012, p. 45)

Rogers's assumption is correct when it comes to the hardwired folk psychology that filmmakers and audiences share – the focal point of cognitive film analyses. However, she does not take into account the fact that numerous canonised filmmaking conventions are based not on hardwired cognitive principles but on aesthetic ones that are relative to social, cultural and historical

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<sup>15</sup> A rare example is Seeley and Carroll (2014, pp. 235–236), who, in the course of conducting a close reading of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) in order to analyse folk-psychological conventions, mention in passing the possible use of cognitive film theory as a tool for filmmakers of similar value to Eisenstein's formalist and Bazin's realist theories.

developments. In this respect, many conventions, such as the rule-of-thirds, the avoidance of jump cuts and the three-act narrative, have become fossilised in the filmmaker's toolbox and have not been subjected to critical evaluation in terms of their actual socio-cultural impact on spectatorship. In the same vein, her observation exemplifies the often criticised *modus operandi* of film cognitivists, by which they focus solely on the mechanics of film viewing rather than the social or cultural predispositions that shape these mechanics. All in all, Rogers's statement is symptomatic of filmmakers' uncritical and implicit deployment of formulaic conventions that make ample use of stereotypes, as well as of cognitive scholars' disregard of socio-cultural contexts and the practice-based application of their theories.

On the one hand, therefore, although it has not yet been attempted, cognitive film theory is well suited to analysing a film practice that facilitates the use of aesthetic and narrative conventions, as well as to conceiving alternatives that would appeal to a wide audience. On the other hand, however, it lacks the initial social framing that would take into account how the representation of topics and characters reveals the repetitive use of narrative formulas that generate preconceived and potentially hegemonic ideas in the spectator. This is particularly important as it is the prerequisite for formulating alternatives that could reconfigure these ideas. Nevertheless, in relation to this project, an overall cognitive approach has the potential to overcome its limitations. This can be summarised in the three cognitive paradigms discussed below: pragmatism, self-correction through cross-disciplinarity, and spectatorship beyond cognition and narrative.

### **2.3.3 Cognitive paradigms**

#### *Pragmatism*

Early cognitive approaches to documentary film, as well as numerous non-cognitive documentary studies, have focused on the indexical relationship between *representation* and *represented*, and have tried to define the term 'documentary', especially in contrast to 'fiction'. However, the huge divergence in documentary

forms, institutions, forms of exhibition, media platforms and spectatorship in the last decade makes a generalised discourse about the nature of documentary and its indexicality academically unsound and reminiscent of the abstract categorising of 'grand theories'. The pragmatic strand of cognitive scholars who study documentary takes a different approach. For instance, Dirk Eitzen (1995, p. 98) suggests that it is not necessary to define documentary; rather, we should examine how people make sense of a particular discourse through the documentary text. Thus, he pinpoints the key cognitive paradigm for documentary spectatorship as an understanding of documentary as a 'mode of reception'.

Eitzen concludes that a documentary does not always make arguments or truth claims: "Documentaries are *presumed* to be truthful, even though considerations about the veracity of particular assertions may play little role in how viewers actually make sense of them" (p. 88). Hence, the study of documentary spectatorship needs to go beyond the examination of truth claims, arguments or emotional engagement based on (or conflated with) authorial intent, analysing instead the spectator's response to any particular assertion in relation to situational cues and textual features. In effect, Eitzen is careful not to fall prey to the confluences, mentioned earlier, of expression/reception and origination/organisation by regarding documentary not as a kind of 'film text' but as a kind of 'reading' (p. 92).

Similarly, Ib Bondebjerg (1994, pp. 66–67) avoids indexical questions of truth claims, authenticity and objectivity by arguing that documentary reception involves an intersubjective mediation of the reality formed by the context and the mental framework of the spectator. For Plantinga (2005, p. 111), this mediation comprises the translation of pro-filmic experience to the spectator in order to form an equivalent experience or belief about the subject. The idea of documentary as a process of 'mediation' is a key paradigm for this thesis and will be elaborated more fully in the next chapter. Given the underdevelopment of documentary spectatorship in cognitive film studies, especially in the pragmatic strand, Eitzen's, Bondebjerg's and Plantinga's ideas remain embryonic, particularly as they are attempting to lay the foundations for a larger documentary discourse that

(unfortunately) has not yet taken place. By adopting their paradigms, however, the critical theorisation of film practice could also advance the academic discourse these three scholars have initiated.

#### *Self-correction through cross-disciplinarity*

Cognitive film theorists largely analyse film spectatorship in terms of folk psychology, a methodology that is more pragmatic than other spectatorship theories such as apparatus theory because it explains the common assumptions filmmakers and spectators share about human psychology and behaviour in general (Plantinga, 2011, pp. 41–43). Thus, a cognitive approach also provides a subtle method for anticipating and explaining the behaviour of people in real, everyday life (Currie, 2004, p. 108), and in light of the attempt by this research to reconfigure blindness stereotypes, it confers an essential benefit.

Cognitive theorising is usually speculative and diffident, formulating scientifically plausible and coherent but at the same time flexible and corrigible arguments (Rushton and Bettinson, 2010, p. 160). In this vein, Plantinga (2011, p. 44) points out that the folk-psychological approach is flexible and has room for deviation and disagreement without the need to have a universal, fixed spectator or a fixed filmmaker/apparatus, as is the case, for instance, in psychoanalytic film theory. Cognitive film discourses are in principle flexible enough to theorise social identities, such as gender, race and disability, even though it has rarely been done. However, Gregory Currie (2004, p. 108) argues that folk psychology must be regimented, refined and corrected by academic constructions based on ‘deep theory’, which brings psychological processes and mechanisms to the fore. Critically examining these processes and mechanisms can provide important insights on stereotyping, benefiting scholarship, as well as documentary practice.

Social cognition is one example of regimenting deep theory – this has been used earlier in this chapter, and will be used again in Chapter Four to explain the link between narrative schemas and blindness stereotypes. Social cognition and cognitive film theory, which are based on cognitive psychology, share in the examination of the mental schemas that accounts for collective human responses to

both the real world and films. However, as mentioned above, cognitive film models usually only address the narrative dimension of schemas in relation to a universalised spectator who processes the folk-psychological narratives or genre codes; they are rarely linked to historical/cultural context, representation and stereotyping – a frequent criticism of cognitive film studies (see, for example, Campbell, 2005; Smaill, 2010). Daniel Barratt (2014, p. 78) addresses this issue by examining the cultural framing of spectatorship in relation to visual perception and cognitive reasoning, and openly calls for cognitive film theory to reassess its predominantly universalist approach. Hence, social cognition theory, in conjunction with stereotype models from cultural studies, offers cognitive film theory an efficient frame through which to link the social context with the hard-wired psychological context of spectatorship<sup>16</sup> and thus account for spectator difference or identity politics, which is still uncharted territory for cognitive film studies<sup>17</sup> (Plantinga, 2009b, p. 257).

Currie (2004, p. 106) explains that cognitivism is a ‘programme’ rather than a specific theory, encouraging the bricolage approach of mixing theories and models across disciplines according to the case study at hand.<sup>18</sup> In scholarly terms, this thesis argues that mapping spectatorship requires a range of models from different fields, including disciplines such as anthropology and phenomenology, which at first glance appear remote from or incompatible with cognitive models.

Anthropological approaches to film combine scientific rigour with artistic aspirations and inherently link theory to practice. For instance, practice-oriented ethnographic texts are imbued with theoretical framings (see, for example, Barbash

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<sup>16</sup> This makes the distinction between ‘audience’ and ‘spectator’ methodologically superfluous (see footnote 3).

<sup>17</sup> Cognitive scholar Per Persson (2003, pp. 9–10) makes a clear distinction between narrative and social schemas in fiction-film spectatorship, which is reminiscent of Schweinitz’s stereotype distinction, but his analysis of social schemas swerves into universalist film readings and remains largely unexplored in relation to real life.

<sup>18</sup> The first cognitive film theory manifesto, *Post-Theory* (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996), was critical of bricolage, considering it a legacy of ‘grand theories’ such as apparatus theory. Contemporary cognitive anthologies, such as *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition at the Movies* (Shimamura, 2013) and *Cognitive Media Theory* (Nannicelli and Taberham, 2014), however, demonstrate the value of bricolage for allowing cognitive film theory to progress beyond neo-formalist and computational paradigms that, following a Cartesian tradition, focused predominantly on mental processes.

and Taylor, 1997; Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2005; Heider, 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Pink, 2007; Pink, 2015), while theory-oriented texts make frequent references to the research and production process (see, for example, Crawford and Turton, 1992; Devereaux and Hillman, 1995; MacDougall, 1998; Russell, 1999a; Ruby, 2000). However, as with documentary studies texts, the limitation of anthropological texts lies in their predominant focus on the filmmaker/researcher's role in gathering data, interacting with social actors, representing them and theorising that representation. Spectatorship is largely missing from their discourses.<sup>19</sup>

Still, their preoccupation with the researcher's encounter with and representation of 'others' makes anthropological paradigms in general a suitable supplement to cognitive theory as they facilitate the conceptualisation of the first-person, embodied encounter between filmmaker and characters, laying the foundation for a corresponding textual construction and spectatorial reception (see Chapter Three). As such, the anthropological models used in this thesis are based on Heidegger's existential and Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology. The reason for approaching these concepts through anthropology is that the discipline naturalises and pragmatizes these philosophical streams in order to allow the empirical mapping and representation of human experience. In fact, the intersection between phenomenology and cognitive film studies, addressing spectatorship beyond pure cognition, has generated the development of a considerable academic subfield in the last ten years.

### *Spectatorship beyond cognition and narrative*

Post-cognitive developments in a variety of fields such as philosophy, biology and psychology have led to the synergy of phenomenological and cognitive paradigms,

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<sup>19</sup> Martinez (1992) and Ruby (2000, pp. 181–194) are the two most notable texts on ethnographic film spectatorship. However, although both approach the subject through ethnographic audience studies (similar to Austin's qualitative audience research study in 2007), evaluated with theories that shed light on socio-cultural contexts (Marxism, semiotics and apparatus theory), they say little about actual experience during film viewing. As anthropologists, their primary focus on culture (Ruby, 2000, p. 184) is understandable, but this leads to a general scepticism, symptomatic in ethnography and visual anthropology, about using psychological spectatorship theories.

manifested in such concepts as ‘embodied cognition’ (Shapiro, 2011) and the ‘phenomenological mind’ (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008). This has resulted in cognitive film scholars moving away from computational and narrative-constructivist approaches, the predominant paradigms in the early stages of this field (Sweeney, 1994; Groves, 2006; Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010), towards exploring the link between mental cognition and embodied experience. Thus, cognitive film models have started addressing spectatorship beyond the level of pure cognition, exploring the subject on a variety of interconnected levels: sensorial and motor responses, feelings, emotions and cognition (see, for example, Grodal, 2009; Antunes, 2016). The necessary empirical data is usually provided by neuroscientific studies (see, for example, Hasson *et al.*, 2008; Zacks *et al.*, 2006; Smith and Mital, 2013; Heimann *et al.*, 2014).

However, while neuroscientists produce these data by examining momentary experiences through a focus on online (moment-to-moment, real-time) cerebral and somatic responses to film viewing, cognitive film scholars tend to embed these data into narrative-based analyses in which aesthetics and momentary experiences are subordinated to folk-psychological plots, characters and themes. This narrative legacy probably still prevails because of the perseverance of the use of mainstream fiction films as case studies (Brunick *et al.*, 2013).<sup>20</sup> Neuroscientists would in theory be able to challenge this narrative dominance, but, unfortunately, they have shown little interest in embedding their empirical results in more elaborate film analyses. As Uri Hasson *et al.* (2008, pp. 21–22), in their study on intersubjective audience correlation in filmic responses, succinctly conclude, this data “should probably not be used to evaluate the aesthetic, artistic, social, or political value of movies ... the critical evaluation of each film is outside the domain of this research”.

The focus of cognitive film scholars on folk-psychological narratives has resulted in appraisal theory, which defines emotion as feelings elicited by the appraisal of a person’s current condition in relation to his/her aims, becoming the

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<sup>20</sup> Notable exceptions, apart from the few documentary examples mentioned earlier, include Taberham (2014), who analyses avant-garde films, and Gregerson (2014), who studies video games.

dominant approach to analysing emotion in fiction film, as Patrick Hogan (2007, pp. 42–43) observes. Emotion-generation is thus attributed to the character's appraisal of how narrative conditions obstruct or facilitate his/her goal. The resulting emotion in the character (and the spectator) triggers the motivation to perform a certain action that will change the narrative conditions, after which the appraisal process starts anew.

However, Hogan interjects that appraisal theory cannot easily account for emotional responses based on a momentary experience that does not necessarily involve a judgement concerning long-term goals (p. 42). Momentary sensorimotor projections, such as the reaction to a screen movement or a cut, are even “more directly involved with emotional experience in that, being more perceptually concrete, they are more directly connected with emotion triggers” (p. 45). Lalita Hogan (2009, p. 109) observes that an imagined character identification, which for many cognitive film scholars is a precondition for the appraisal theory to work, is not necessary for cinematic emotion: “A viewer can become invested in tasks such as a character dropping an object, and wait for him to pick it up with as much eagerness as [if] he or she might wait for the unravelling of a murder mystery.” Thus, short-term emotions can be evoked by the spectator's proximity to an object or body, and by the sense of a present, tangible reality, such as movement, gestures and everyday tasks. Greg Smith's mood-cue model (2003), discussed in Chapter Five, is a good example in that it discusses mood generation through momentary emotional cues that are not primarily based on plot structures or character empathy.

Smith (2007, pp. 91–92) also argues for a focus on momentary experience in documentary by exploring how local, textual structures elicit spectatorial cognition and emotion. The formal elements of documentary can vary greatly (for example, in interviews and observational, archival and performance-based films), and often do so within the same scene. Smith asserts that documentary spectatorship should be analysed in relation to disparities and shifts in textual cues, rather than a top-down analysis that presumes a homogenous narrative experience based on prototypical documentary genres or modes of address.

However, this does not mean that my films reject narrative per se. On the contrary, Chapter Six uses a variety of narrative structuring strategies that coherently mediate Terry's and June's subjective, everyday experiences. However, these strategies do not adhere to folk-psychological narratives; rather, they address contrasting momentary experiences as constituents of heterogeneous, global narrative structures. In this way, the top-down mechanism of folk-psychological narratives, which subordinates momentary, embodied experiences and places them in strict relation to character-led plot trajectories, is inverted and transformed into a bottom-up mechanism where themes, characters and narrative structures organically emerge from momentary, embodied experiences.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The value of a cognitive approach to my film practice is two-fold. Firstly, social cognition models, linked to an analysis of folk-psychological narratives and aesthetic tropes in films representing blind characters, enable the identification of disability stereotypes in common film practices and spectatorship dispositions. The awareness of these societal predispositions critically informs my film practice, which seeks to undo such stereotypes. Secondly, through its focus on mainstream audience reception, a cognitive approach can target a Western mainstream audience (as hypothesised in the following chapter) by deploying filmic conventions in conjunction with alternative modes of representation.

This thesis, therefore, operates over three disciplines. First of all, it attempts to conceive a critical methodology for documentary film practice, tested in the domain of disability representation. It aims to take into account socio-cultural implications by overriding the normative function of the practice textbooks, which tend to solicit normative spectatorship schemas. In addition, its focus on spectatorship deviates from the usual practice-led research that predominantly addresses either authorship or the work itself. The second discipline is cognitive film studies. Here, the thesis aims to (a) incorporate social cognition, thus providing a social identity to the spectator; (b) challenge predominant narrative models by addressing momentary, embodied experience elicited through aesthetic and

narrative strategies; (c) demonstrate a practice-based application through the reverse-engineering of cognitive models; and (d) develop the limited documentary discourse by addressing documentary spectatorship in a scholarly and practice-based context. The third discipline this research inhabits is documentary film studies, in which it aims to expand the discourse on spectatorship approaches and introduce cognitive theory as a viable research tool that will extend the boundaries of the field.

The common denominator in these three areas is the connection between theory and practice. A theorised film practice demonstrates the value of cross-disciplinarity and tests the complementary nature and pragmatic applicability of every model involved, and this in turn produces praxical knowledge for both practitioners and scholars. The next chapter formulates a methodology that pursues the dual task of scholarly rigour and practice-focused applicability.

## Chapter Three: Dispositions and Mediations

### 3.1 Introduction

The following chapter proposes a methodology that enables a rigorous response to the research questions identified in Chapter One. As indicated in the last chapter, this practice-focused methodology is neither meta-theoretical, nor does it deal specifically with the actual subject of disability. Instead, it aims to establish a critical, theoretical framework for film practice, which, although initially conceived as a result of my experience of making two films focused on blind protagonists, could be easily adapted to other subject matter involving characters who are part of a specific social or cultural group that suffers societal discrimination.

This methodological framework is a flexible one that introduces certain premises and suitable academic fields rather than medium-specific filmmaking methods (these are introduced in the subsequent practice chapters). As Wayne (2008, p. 84) explains, it is standard practice in the field of social sciences to distinguish between methodologies and methods, and this is a useful procedure. According to this view, a methodology is a coherent set of principles that inform the approach to knowledge <sup>21</sup> generation (for example, cognitive theory, phenomenology and ethnography), while a method represents a medium-specific tool that executes these principles (for example, the use of interviews and narrative structuring in documentary film). It is only through the identification of a methodology that “activities and interactions with culturally constructed meanings” are reflexively brought to the fore, whereas the deployment of methods without methodological contextualisation may lead to implicit assumptions that forfeit critical considerations (pp. 84-85) – a trait that is commonplace in documentary practice textbooks.

The methodology consists of two stages. The first involves the mapping of pre-existing audience dispositions through a content analysis of existing

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<sup>21</sup> Wayne uses the term ‘knowledge’ very generically, implying that it could also include ‘experience’. This chapter will establish and contextualise the concept of experience as the major focus of the methodology.

documentaries focusing on the same subject matter in order to identify schemas and potential stereotypes based in the social cognition and folk-psychological theories established in Chapter Two. This procedure offers a critical framework for my documentary practice in that it identifies strategies for undoing portrayals that lead to the othering of blind people. The second stage, which is informed by the outcome of the content analysis, identifies documentary practice as a process of mediation. The mechanism of this process, in relation to my practice, consists of my encounters with the characters and their pro-filmic experiences, mediated by phenomenological paradigms (pre-filmic mediation), and the audience's encounter with the film text, mediated by cognitive paradigms (post-filmic mediation).

Given that the methodology targets spectatorial experience as the ultimate outcome of the practice, arguably this chapter's most ambitious objective is to demarcate the actual audience. A target audience is therefore hypothesised in the section on dispositions (below). Later, the section on post-filmic mediation identifies the means for gauging specific types of audience experience, and the chapter ends with a discussion on the role of ethical principles in the mediation process.

## **3.2 Spectator dispositions**

### **3.2.1 Dispositions through content analysis**

Per Persson's (2003, pp. 23–24) cognitive approach to film analysis attributes two external parameters to spectatorship: the discourse, which comprises all the audio-visual cues and stimuli perceived in the film, and the spectator's dispositions, which refers to expectations, schemas, cultural models and ideology. Bordwell (1985, p. 32) identifies dispositions as "prior knowledge and experience", and reveals that the generation of knowledge and formation of experience during film viewing are necessarily linked to schemas derived from our interactions with the everyday world and with other art and media outputs. As mentioned earlier, these schemas are created through simplification and categorisation, and the social cognition perspective provides the link between narrative-based, universalist cognitive film

models and socio-cultural stereotyping. Neil Macrae and Galen Bodenhausen explain:

[P]eople's outputs (evaluations, impressions, memories) are shaped and guided by their knowledge and pre-existing beliefs about the social world ... rather than viewing individuals on the basis of their unique constellations of attributes and proclivities, perceivers prefer instead to furnish categorical (i.e. stereotype-based) conceptions of others ... [I]nformation processing is an active process that is guided and shaped by people's generic beliefs about the world (i.e. schematic thinking) ... rather than responding to the world as it really is ... Reliance on categorical knowledge structures is mentally easier than the alternative of forming data-based, individuated impressions of others ... Simply stated, categorical thinking is preferred because it is cognitively economical. (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2001, pp. 240–241)

With reference to Plantinga's filmmaker-audience loop, this categorical thinking informs and is informed by stereotypical representations in fine art, media and literature, and is guided by folk-psychological narrative formulas in particular. However, another loop exists that pertains to the link between media images and real life: representations have consequences for public awareness and social behaviour, especially when it comes to disability, and this in turn perpetuates stereotypes. According to Richard Dyer (2002, p. 1), how "social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life ... poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination (in housing, jobs, educational opportunity and so on) are shored up and instituted by representation".

For this reason, Anne Pointon (1997, pp. 84–92) calls for documentary filmmakers to critically engage with their own and their peers' media practice in order to address stereotypical representations of disability, a call that echoes Mike Wayne's and Patrick Fuery's demands for a critical film practice. In this respect, qualitative content analysis offers an efficient strategy for gauging the spectator's and the filmmaker's own dispositions, including the tendency towards stereotyping, as well as encouraging the filmmaker to consider alternative narrative and aesthetic

strategies.<sup>22</sup> Disability scholar Beth Haller (2010, p. 27) explains that content analysis reflects the mass-mediation of Western societies “in which their citizens understand ‘reality’ through personal experience and mass media information”. Louis Cheskin (cited in Hartley, 2003, p. 128) even argues that media content *is* reality, as our experience of it “constitutes a significant, and growing, part of our overall experience of life”. Any consistencies, or likewise any changes, in media content reliably reflect the social reality of the moment; hence, apart from revealing the status quo of our culture *in* the media, content analysis also reveals the *performance of* the media (McQuail, cited in Haller, 2010, pp. 26–27). This performance does not only pertain to the mode of representation, but also to what *is* and what is *not* being represented. For example, in relation to blindness, it will become apparent that there is a significant lack of representations of the ordinary or everyday experience of blind characters.

Clive Seale and Fran Tonkiss (2012, p. 460) explain that content analysis generally involves the quantitative examination of media outputs in terms of the presence and frequency of specific terms, narratives or concepts. However, it is not always necessary to embark on an empirically rigorous and large-scale content analysis, especially for the practice-based researcher. For instance, Haller uses a qualitative content analysis consisting of only five films to evaluate disability portrayals in media. Limiting research to a small sample enables the researcher to understand the production and interpretation of meaning in media texts, and to draw conclusions about wider social and cultural practices (Haller, 2010, pp. 34–35). Hence, for the purposes of this thesis, an anecdotal list of documentaries portraying blind people is sufficient. As Sean Cubitt (2013a, p. 6) asserts, the extreme specificity of the anecdotal method “provides depth and colour to the generalist findings of methods that deal with multiple instances and large-scale tendencies”, and grounds more abstract formations, such as representations, in a specific instance.

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<sup>22</sup> While a content analysis may be useful for the making of a documentary about a commonly mis- or under-represented group, it may not be relevant for certain types of documentaries, such as autobiographical or essay films, and this thesis does not propose that is adopted as standard procedure in documentary practice.

However, anecdotal evidence can be problematic, especially when drawing conclusions about common denominators and the potential prevalence of stereotypes, but, a small-scale content analysis can be substantiated through a mechanism of critical and theoretical framing from relevant academic fields, which can provide insights into larger social issues (Seale and Tonkiss, 2012, p. 465). As a consequence, the content analysis in the next chapter involves first of all the identification of folk-psychological narrative models and aesthetic tropes, framed by the schematic models of social cognition theory. This analysis is then evaluated using models from disability and cultural studies, revealing in the process potentially alternative forms of representation that reconfigure stereotypes of blindness.

### **3.2.2 The target audience**

The content analysis inevitably relates to the target audience for my documentaries, since the sample of documentary films about blindness needs to represent the same constituency of spectators as my own practice. This constituency can be heuristically described by means of the following three criteria. Firstly, bearing in mind the research questions, it should be an audience composed of the 'general public'. Keith Sawyer (2006, p. 127) offers a simple yet pragmatic audience model by distinguishing between three groups of spectators: 'connoisseurs', 'amateurs' and the 'public'. In my case, these audience groups need to be differentiated according to the extent of their critical knowledge about stereotypical representations of blind people.

Connoisseurs know most about the domain in question; they are creatively and intellectually more active and more critical (p. 127). In terms of blindness, it can be assumed that connoisseurs include disability studies scholars, neuroscientists, psychologists, psychotherapists and any other academic or non-academic professionals who are active in this area. However, this group should also include media and ethnographic scholars who are familiar with a wide range of issues

surrounding documentary film practice and representations of otherness.<sup>23</sup> As such, these connoisseurs can be presumed not to be susceptible to stereotypes, and when watching films about blindness, their dispositions with regard to disability will be, by default, critical and reflexive. However, their professional expertise may lead them to focus on specific issues, detracting from their overall experience of the film, which would not be the case for an ideal viewer – this would apply whether the film operates with stereotypes or attempts to reconfigure them.

Amateurs, according to Sawyer, have been exposed to some experience of the topic or the medium, but not in a professional context (p. 129). In terms of blindness, this group could be made up of people who have blind acquaintances or relatives, and have first-hand, personal or anecdotal experience of the other but lack the critical context a connoisseur would bring to the film. Of course, familiarity can result in an awareness of stereotypes, and amateurs may resist them, but this is by no means verifiable or possible to hypothesise, just as many industry filmmakers may or may not have the appropriate critical framework to avoid stereotypes about blindness. Overall, it is not easy to predict the reactions of amateurs.

The boundary between connoisseurs and amateurs is porous, but if my target audience is the general public, the boundary between this group and the previous two is altogether more clear-cut. As Sawyer explains, such an audience operates collectively and represents the majority of spectators (p. 130). The public is familiar with blind people only through mediated content that lacks a critical framework which would avert the formation of stereotypes. With reference to Walter Lippmann's (1991, pp. 13–17) idea of how public opinion is shaped by unquestioned stereotypes due to the lack of personal experience, a public audience does not have first-hand experience of blind people, nor is it familiar with critical or theoretical debates about disability. For this reason, this group is very prone to the implicit consumption of folk-psychological formulas and the adoption of stereotypes. Viewed from this perspective, filmmakers who follow the documentary practice textbooks without supplementing them with critical theory also fall into this group, even if they have personal contact with blind characters during filming.

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote 12 for an explanation of how the notion of the 'other' is used in this thesis.

As the content analysis in the next chapter reveals, neither first-hand experience of blind people (in the case of all the featured filmmakers), nor first-person experience of blindness itself (in the case of one blind filmmaker), can guarantee they will bypass the stereotypes.

In addition, a public audience can also represent a mainstream<sup>24</sup> film audience. It is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the definition of the term 'mainstream'; rather, the term is used loosely to mean the polar opposite of experimental or avant-garde films. An experimental film audience is, compared with a public one, a minority that may well fall into the amateur category when it comes to disability representations. For this reason, experimental films are not selected as samples for the content analysis later in the research, as they do not attract a public audience; instead, the sample comprises films whose exhibition and distribution strategies indicate they are targeted at just such an audience. The use of the elusive notion of mainstream is also an inherent trait of documentary practice textbooks and their folk-psychological formulas, as well as the cognitivists' attribution of folk-psychological narratives to mainstream films, both of which my sample needs to reflect. In addition, when disability scholars discuss abled/disabled power distributions in relation to media, as well as the formation and perpetuation of stereotypes, they predominantly refer to a public audience or mainstream media practitioners. Thus, my work needs to be located in the same mainstream-audience context in order to benefit from this academic field and to reconfigure existing stereotypes. In crude terms, blindness is mainly subject to stereotyping in the mainstream media, and for this reason, it needs to be 'de-stereotyped' and reconfigured in the mainstream, too.

The second criterion refers to contemporary audiences. This is a necessary restriction given my aim of using my films to reconfigure the stereotypes that are generated by contemporary films and filmmakers, and consumed by contemporary spectators. Further, due to limitations of time and space, it was not possible to include an historical analysis of media representations. For these reasons, I chose a sample of films made after 2000.

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<sup>24</sup> For an explanation of the use of the term 'mainstream' in this thesis, see footnote 11.

The third criterion refers to a Western audience. Again, it is not within the scope of this thesis to define the term 'Western', but given the cultural context I am familiar with, I broadly define it as comprising Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. This approach at least offers a conscious approximation of a cultural context, unlike the majority of universalist cognitive film theories. To summarise, the sample will include those films depicting blind people that are likely to have been seen by a public, mainstream, Western audience.<sup>25</sup>

The content analysis provides insights into spectator dispositions towards blindness, derived from the continual use of particular, stereotypical portrayals in documentaries. This allows the conception of alternative portrayals as a first step to potentially reconfiguring these dispositions. Consequently, the analytical interpretation of the film content provides a critical framework for my documentary practice, which identifies the focus of representation as my two blind characters, Terry and June; in other words, it establishes what needs to be filmically mediated.

### **3.3 Documentary practice as a process of mediation**

#### **3.3.1 The mediation process**

Bondebjerg (1994, pp. 67–70) argues that documentary spectatorship involves the experience of a mediated reality, informed by the context in which it is viewed and the dispositions of the spectator and the filmmaker. If documentary is considered a mediated reception, and its creation an act of mediation, this process becomes necessarily teleological: the aim is to mediate *something* to *someone*. This represents the major paradigm of my thesis, and is also the general position of cognitive film scholars, who study films strictly from a spectator's perspective. Documentary mediation also echoes Haller's earlier idea that Western society is mass-mediated (see above). As an antidote, she proposes content analysis as a way of gauging disability representations and their corresponding stereotypes. However, while the outcome of the content analysis in the next chapter will frame my

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<sup>25</sup> This will be heuristically judged by festival screenings and broadcasts.

mediation process, it is first necessary to establish a fundamental methodological structure of documentary mediation which can later be adapted to the case study.

As a term, mediation literally means the conveyance of meaning or information through a particular agent, resulting in an indirect transferral of that meaning or information (Hayward, 2000, p. 213). The inherent indirectness of mediation is a significant paradigm – as Cubitt (2013b, p. 1) puts it, “[t]here is no *immediate* [my emphasis]”. This comment resonates with Bondebjerg’s (1994, pp. 67–68) assertion that it is futile to discuss documentary in relation to one ‘real’ reality that is skewed by mediation; instead, we should accept and examine multiple, mediated realities. For Cubitt (2013b, p. 1), mediation is also part of the universal phenomenon of interaction and connectivity. This means that the mediation process in documentary film comprises the interaction between four interlocutors: the characters, the filmmaker, the film text and the spectator. The interfaces between these agents play an important role in documentary practice.

### **3.3.2 A model of mediation**

Renov’s (1986) model of mediation is a good starting point for documentary practice. His pragmatic aim is to bypass discussions about ‘factuality’ and ‘objectivity’ by proposing a modular framework of accumulative mediation from the historical ‘real’ to the spectatorially perceived ‘real’. In a similar way to Cubitt, Renov considers mediation a relational zone in which transformative operations between related experiences take place, and he identifies three distinct levels of mediation (p. 72): 1) from the historical real to the pro-filmic; 2) from the pro-filmic to the text; and 3) from the text to the spectator.

Unfortunately for this research, Renov discusses the meta-theoretical grounding of the model and elaborates on levels 1 and 2 (p. 76), but does not use the same theoretical rigour for the third stage, which he leaves open for future examination.<sup>26</sup> Still, his model crucially distinguishes between the filmmaker’s and

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<sup>26</sup> Renov follows this up in later works, such as *Toward a Poetics of Documentary* (1993), choosing a psychoanalytic approach – see Chapter Two.

the spectator's experience, preventing the conflation of expression and perception discussed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, his focus on mediating certain phenomena refocuses attention from ontological and semiotic concerns towards the transformation of experience from production to reception (p. 72). Experience, as such, will be identified as the object of mediation later in this chapter, where it is argued that it transcends cumbersome differentiations between knowledge, emotions and embodied sensations.

Nevertheless, Renov's model requires some adaptation. For example, his first level (from historical real to pro-filmic) is too concerned with questions of authorial intervention and performance, questioning how the historical real is affected by the presence of the filmmaker (p. 72). Phenomenologist Alan Casebier (1991, p. 139) rightly points out that Renov's distinction between the historical real and the pro-filmic is only an idealist or nominalist model, since there is no reason to consider the historical object exists independently of any relationship to the filmmaker or the audience. However, this stage does address the experiential first-hand encounter between filmmaker and subject, without bringing medium-specific formal elements and their reception into the discussion. This does not mean that spectatorship is ignored; on the contrary, especially in this thesis, the content analysis makes spectatorial assumptions that directly inform the filmmaker-subject encounter with the aim of ultimately reconfiguring stereotypical spectatorial dispositions. But, at this stage, the practitioner's main aim, prior to filmic capture, is to map spatio-temporal experiences by either observing or orchestrating characters, spaces and events, based on creative authorial choices, not spectatorship (though both can be related).

However, this first-hand encounter is not only pro-filmic, as Renov suggests, but can also include the virtual encounter of the filmmaker with the subjects through the camera lens, in the rushes during editing, or in any kind of archive material. Of course, film-formal choices are chronologically and conceptually inseparable from the filmmaker's encounter with the subjects or the film rushes, but it is here that the confusion between expression and perception occurs. For instance, the use of a certain shot size could have been made to allow the

filmmaker a vantage point in the filming situation or simply to execute a creative idea, which does not mean that the spectator will experience the shot size in the same manner as the filmmaker. If, however, the shot size was chosen with the spectator in mind, then it refers to Renov's third level, the encounter between spectator and film text. Consequently, the two instances – the filmmaker's first-hand experience of the subjects and the audience's collective experience of the film text – require different methods. A spectatorship-focused approach to documentary practice needs to acknowledge this methodological (not chronological or conceptual) distinction, especially if the filmmaker wants to map a certain experience aimed at prompting a corresponding experience in the spectator.

The proposed model (figure 6) suggests that the first level of mediation refers to the filmmaker's first-hand encounter with the raw materials of the documentary (including subjects, rushes, archives, animations and sound effects) and could be called the 'pre-filmic level'. The second, which refers to the audience's collective encounter with the constructed film text, could be called the 'post-filmic level'. This level combines Renov's last two levels in one and compensates for his problematic distinction between film form (level 2) and spectatorship (level 3). My premise is that at the post-filmic level the film is 'formed' with the spectator in mind.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In several respects, the pre-filmic/post-filmic distinction appears similar to Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, with its consideration of dispositions to production and reception ('frameworks of knowledge'). However, Hall's semiotic model is not targeted at media practice but media analysis, and discusses many aspects that would not be practical for documentary practice to consider (for example, the technical infrastructure of film viewing). Furthermore, the model's emphasis on encoded meaning or knowledge, and the related audience positions of dominant, negotiated and oppositional, leaves little scope to explore the embodied audience experience that constitutes a major part of this thesis. Hall does briefly mention different audience responses, such as emotions (p. 130), but his main focus is on 'meaning'. For a comprehensive sociological and ethnographic approach to media audiences using Hall's model, see Shaun Moores' *Interpreting Audiences* (1993). My thesis also uses phenomenological-anthropological paradigms that would be difficult to integrate into Hall's model. As argued later, the consideration of meaning-making on pre-filmic and post-filmic levels is not a primary objective for documentaries that aim to mediate subjective experience, and distracts from the conceptualisation process. Lastly, the encoding/decoding distinction contradicts the notion of a permeable interface between two relational zones that operate in conjunction with each other via mediation – an operation which is embodied by the filmmaker's dual work on the pre-filmic and post-filmic levels. In short, it is more expedient for my methodology to adapt Renov's rather than Hall's model.

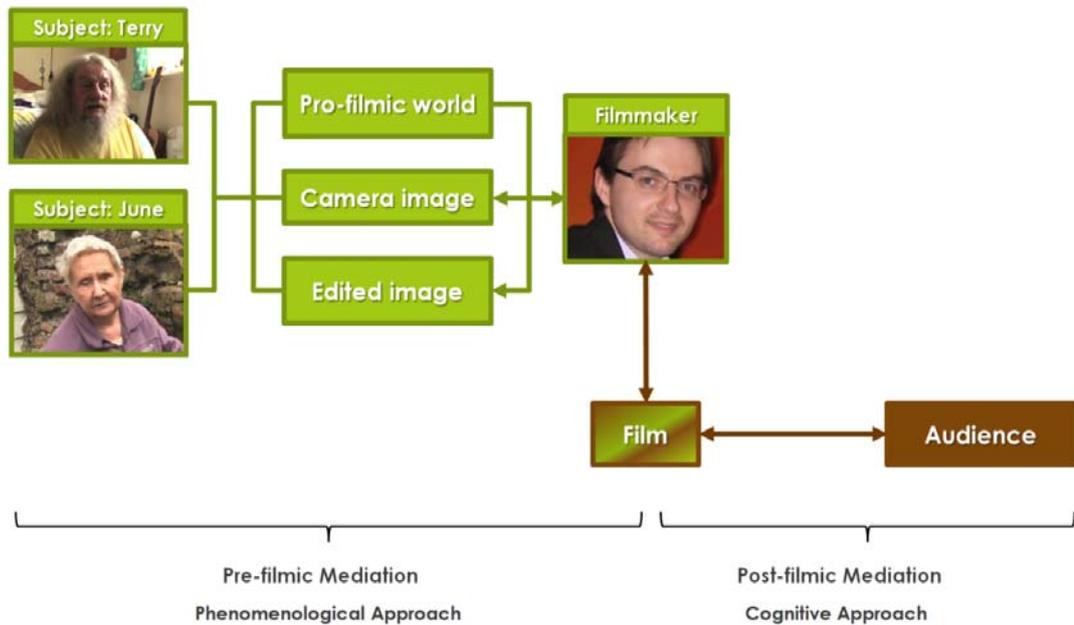


Figure 6: Filmmaking as a mediation process

### 3.4 Pre-filmic mediation

Thus far, I have used the generic term 'experience' as the object of filmic mediation. A pragmatic understanding of experience<sup>28</sup> can be reached by asking two questions in relation to mediation: firstly, whose experience needs to be mediated, and secondly, how can experience be mapped pre-filmically so that it can be transposed onto the spectator post-filmically, triggering an equivalent but not necessarily identical viewing experience.

#### 3.4.1 Whose experience?

The representation of otherness has been part of an ongoing discourse in anthropology. Allison Reid-Cunningham (2009, p. 102) explains that research about and representation of disability experienced a significant shift in the 1970s; prior to this, anthropological studies focused on 'etic' accounts of disabled people. Etic research is conducted from outside a social group from the perspective of an

<sup>28</sup> 'Pragmatic', in this context, refers to practical application through documentary practice, not the philosophical tradition. For a pragmatic-philosophical discussion of the concept of experience, see John Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1994).

observer who attempts to describe behaviour in culturally neutral terms that can be applied across cultures. David MacDougall (1998, p. 78) calls this, “knowledge by description”, which in classical ethnography generally referred to (written) language. The shift in the 1970s saw an adoption of phenomenological perspectives taking an ‘emic’ approach, which, in contrast, offers detailed descriptions of *lived* experience – that is, it attempts to present the subject from their own perspective (Reid-Cunningham, 2009, p. 102). Emic research produces “knowledge by acquaintance”, where meaning is not the “outcome of reflection upon experience but necessarily *includes* the experience ... the experience *is* the knowledge” (MacDougall, 1998, p. 79). Unlike descriptive or explanatory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance is affective and falls within the domain of experience.

The anthropological understanding of experience, therefore, relates to the point of view of the characters portrayed on film in order to reduce any form of otherness. Peter Crawford’s (1992, p. 77) idea of an experiential mode of ethnographic filmmaking describes films that emphasise the similarities between ‘us’ and ‘them’ through aesthetic and narrative strategies, resulting in the audience perceiving the everyday reality of other social or cultural groups. Pre-filmically, this means that instead of focusing on the social structures of a generalised disability, I focus on the first-hand experiential structures of the characters – something documentary filmmakers already attempt to do, especially in character-driven documentaries. Documentary practice, as prescribed in the textbooks and executed in reality, strives to mediate emic experience through externalising emotions and motivations, as do folk-psychological narratives. Some films even use elaborate aesthetic experimentation to approximate how blind people perceive the physical world and experience memories. Unfortunately, as Chapter Four reveals, these attempts result in the mediation of etic (authorial and artistic) experiences or a folk-psychological formulaic experience disguised as emic experience, which perpetuates the stereotyping and othering of blind people.

Does this mean that the pursuit of emic experience is futile, especially if a sighted filmmaker makes a film about a blind subject? According to MacDougall (2006, p. 16), represented experience cannot be a one-to-one rendition of the so-

called 'real' experience because representations "create new experience in their own right". However, the amalgamation of the experiences of characters, filmmakers and audience is the very premise on which mediation rests, and it does not disqualify the attempt to approximate emic experience. Indeed, a critically theorised approximation is essential to reducing otherness. In relation to blind people (and other stereotyped social groups), Chapter Four promotes a focus on the ordinary, everyday lives and the alterity (as distinguished from otherness) of the characters. This has the potential to lead to a reconfiguration of stereotypes. However, if it is to work as a foundation for such an outcome, this strategy requires a general set of methodological paradigms that theorise the practical mapping of emic experience on pre-filmic and post-filmic levels.

It needs to be stressed, however, that an emic methodology does not imply an observational filmic approach with minimum intervention. On the contrary, this would be dogmatic as it pre-supposes the controversial assumption that subjects can ignore the presence of the filmmaker and the camera, and behave in the way they would if the camera was absent. Furthermore, it would exclude valuable non-observational techniques (such as the interview, the voice-over or the use of archive material) to mediate emic experiences that would not otherwise be palpable. Also, an emic approach should not seek to hide the authorial presence of the filmmaker, neither pre-filmically nor post-filmically; if his or her presence has a mappable impact on the characters' encounter with the filmmaker, that impact should not be denied.

For example, several scenes in the film with Terry reveal my presence, overtly displaying how that presence alters Terry's emic experience during the filmmaking process, and also make direct references to the editing process from Terry's point of view. In both films, numerous scenes reveal my presence through Terry's and June's direct address to the camera or through certain reflexive aesthetics such as long static takes of the characters' backs. Emic research and reflexive authorship are not mutually exclusive as long as that reflexivity is a by-product of the character's own experience, not a purely authorial choice (which would turn the emic approach into an etic one). MacDougall (1998, p. 89) refers to

this as 'deep reflexivity', which positions the author within rather than outside the film text.

### **3.4.2 Mapping emic experience**

The shift from etic to emic and experiential approaches in anthropological research was only possible through the adoption of a phenomenological perspective. According to Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2008, p. 7), the main aim of phenomenology is to describe the first-person perspective of the agent of experience (the researched subject), not of the researcher. These authors further argue that experience need not be defined or described; rather, it should be mapped by exploring its structures (p. 9). This pragmatic approach is not concerned with philosophical theorisations about what experience actually means, but with identifying parameters that allow the filmmaker to observe and map emic experience. In this, it mirrors the film cognitivist approach to documentary, in which the term 'documentary' is not defined but mapped in terms of its perception (see Chapter Two).

Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, p. 8) explain that experience is not only a purely subjective phenomenon, but also the lived experience of "a perceiver who is *in the world*, and who is also an embodied agent with motivations and purposes". Thus, perceptual experience involves the interaction of spatial, temporal and bodily structures – the constituents of phenomenological inquiry. A range of anthropologists and sociologists who have adopted phenomenology have made a particular case for experience being linked to the physical external world. For example, Yi-fu Tuan (1977, p. 9) asserts that "experience is directed to the external world ... Seeing and thinking clearly reach out beyond the self." He regards experience as chaotic, fleeting and elusive, and claim that we use spaces (as concrete artefacts) and our body (as words and actions) to provide it with duration and coherence (Tuan, 1980, p. 466). This is another form of mediation. According to Cubitt (2013b, p. 1), mediation takes place not only between human entities, but

between humans and their physical environments. Experience is thus captured in something empirically tangible; it becomes embodied.

The relationship between body and physical space has been illuminated by James Gibson's (1986) 'affordance theory'. As the relation between an organism and the object or environment that affords it the opportunity to perform an action, affordance involves, simultaneously, the action-readiness of the subject and the physical qualities of the object or space in question (pp. 127–128). If perceptual experience is seen in this context, identifying affordances of the body in relation to space can be particularly enlightening, especially in relation to blindness. For instance, Tuan (1977, p. 12) explains that space is experienced through movement, which is "often directed toward, or repulsed by, objects and places". Thus, action and perception are inextricably linked. Phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. 121, 167, 293–295) has called this connection 'intentional threads'; the body is 'anchored' in space, it has a 'grip' on the physical environment and is 'geared' towards the objects it works with. As he puts it, "*being* is synonymous with being *situated*" (p. 294), and being situated means interacting with a physical environment (Dant, 2008, p. 19).

This anchoring is informed in particular by accumulated corporeal knowledge about a particular situation and space. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Nick Crossley (2001, p. 102) identifies these as corporeal schemas, which are the "fundamental coordination of the embodied agent with both self and world", whereby a "corporeal schema is an incorporated bodily know-how and practical sense; a perspectival grasp upon the world from the 'point of view' of the body". On a pre-filmic level, this suggests that the filmmaker needs to pay particular attention to the temporal interaction between the character's body, space and objects.

In addition, the concept of a 'corporeal schema' is very useful for mapping emic experience in an everyday context. The subject's level of dexterity when interacting with physical spaces serves as a good benchmark by which the filmmaker can judge whether these are everyday actions, and how the presence of the filmmaker impacts them, such as the incident where Terry bumps into the camera during a cigarette break (see Chapter Six). All these considerations about

embodied experience facilitate the mapping, filming and, ultimately, the mediation of emic experience to the audience. As these considerations are based on first-hand experiences in relation to body and space, the pre-filmic methods in the practice chapters will constitute phenomenological models largely adopted from visual anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. These fields have had a long tradition of assimilating the complex concepts of classical phenomenologists, such as Husserl and Heidegger, and developing them into pragmatic models for empirical research.

Finally, as this thesis is spectatorship-focused, the pre-filmic level will only be discussed and theorised to the extent necessary to map emic experience which can then be post-filmically mediated; issues of authorial creativity, introspection or intuition, or research strategies that are only tangentially related to spectatorship, will not be discussed. Naturally, all these issues are paramount components of the mediation process, but they fall outside the scope of the theoretical discourse of this thesis.

### **3.5 Post-filmic mediation**

#### **3.5.1 The naturalisation of emic experience**

The post-filmic level of mediation refers to the 'encounter' between audience and film text. It has two interrelated dimensions: the filmmaker's activity when formalising the emic experience, mapped pre-filmically, and the audience's activity when approximating a corresponding (although not equal) experience. The consensus among spectatorship scholars is that audiences are theorised as collectives, as aggregates of individuals (Reinhard, 2016). Thus, the interface between pre-filmic and post-filmic requires careful consideration since pre-filmic experience is not automatically mediated to the audience in the way it is enacted or intended by the filmmaker pre-filmically. Pre-filmic data is phenomenological (first-person, subjective, corporeally situated) and needs to be 'translated' into post-filmic data (third-person, collective, textually situated). The principles of this translation can be pinpointed by looking at how phenomenological data is captured

or described in natural science, a process that has been coined as ‘naturalising phenomenology’ (Petitot *et al.*, 1999).

Within the study of consciousness, Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, p. 30) describe Eduard Marbach’s approach to naturalisation as the embedding of empirical results of phenomenological observations into “formalized descriptions that bear intersubjectively shareable meanings”. This procedure aims to facilitate the interpretation and communicability of subjective, phenomenological data through the use of a common notation that expresses not the content of experience, but its formal structure, and essentially renders experience capable of being shared or mediated. With regards to film, this notation corresponds to the conceptualisation of film form through spectatorship models that account for a collective response to emic experience. Through reverse engineering, these models can ‘imply’ the audience through the design of the film form (Plantinga, 2009b, p. 250). This raises two pressing questions: who is this implied audience and what are the most suitable models for formalising (emic) experience?

### **3.5.2 The implied audience**

As noted above, my target audience is a public one. However, at a post-filmic stage, that audience needs to be theorised through the type of experience they will have when viewing the film. The pre-filmic experience has been phenomenologically framed; that is, embodied in the interaction between bodies, spaces and objects. Thus, the post-filmic experience needs to ensure that this embodiment is mediated by embodying the audience itself in the film text, unlike, for example, films in the Soviet formalist tradition, which use montage techniques that elicit the audience’s construction of the film through inference and interpretation from an external position. In this sense, my aim is to post-filmically create a film text that generates an audience, rather than eliciting an audience reception. Post-filmic experience should involve the audience’s perception of screen bodies and physical spaces in a mutually embodied relationship. This assumes a pre-conscious and implicit formation of impressions about screen characters’ bodies. Nicole Markotić (2012,

p. 3) refers to this as a “somatic filmic truth”, which is not questioned or evaluated but experienced.



Figure 7: *Drinking for England* (1998) – being drunk

A good example of this is a scene in Brian Hill’s documentary, *Drinking for England* (1998), depicting two drunken women weaving along a street for a fairly long period of screen time (figure 7). The scene foregrounds experience over meaning, and does not need to be cognitively inferred or evaluated by the audience. Of course, the audience may create thematic associations related to British culture, class, gender, or their own drinking habits – or they may temporarily experience the moment without any interpretation. Whichever the case, it is first and foremost simply what it is: an embodied experience of being drunk.

Films like *Drinking for England* are described by Nichols (2001) as performative<sup>29</sup> documentaries. They generate audience experience through concrete and embodied knowledge rather than the transmission of generalised and abstract meanings (p. 131). This type of experience is purely subjective and departs from factual recounting. Furthermore, these films do not address the spectator “with commands or imperatives necessarily, but with a sense of emphatic engagement”, turning the viewer, rather than the historical world, into the primary referent (Nichols, 1994, p. 94) – the viewer is embodied in the film. Thus, Nichols

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<sup>29</sup> It is not within the scope of this thesis to define the concepts of ‘performance’ or ‘performativity’, since they are marginal to the methodology of my film practice, and because there are various interpretations of these terms within documentary film studies. For example, while Nichols (2001, p. 131) refers to it as subjective and embodied knowledge, Bruzzi (2006, p. 154), in Judith Butler’s tradition, describes it as “utterances that simultaneously both describe and perform an action”.

implies that the post-filmic representation of emic experience has the potential to background questions about meaning, ethics and indexicality.

However, Nichols (2001, p. 131) is prudent to point out that these films may still prompt the audience to make meaning, but in an affective manner that results in polysemic readings, since the strong subjectivity of portrayed experience results in different meanings for different spectators and “underscores the complexity of our knowledge of the world”. As John Little (2007, p. 25) confirms, these films may “*suggest*, and not *argue* a message by drawing a conclusion *from* the viewer – not *for* the viewer”. This type of film relates to Eco’s (1979, p. 9) concept of the ‘open text’, in which the interpretive work is done by the reader, and the interplay of numerous possible interpretations takes place. Post-filmically, my films need to operate on this open and experiential level in order to mediate emic experience. This does not mean that I deny spectatorial readings, but since I aim to primarily mediate embodied experiences, the gauging of high-level audience interpretations (whether polysemic or not) would require a dedicated audience research study, which is impractical for documentary practice.

### **3.5.3 The homogeneity of post-filmic experience**

All of the above hypotheses about post-filmic experience assume that embodied experience (through audio-visual perception) is fundamental to spectatorship, and it provides a largely homogenous low-level perceptual and cognitive response. High-level cognitive processes, such as thematic interpretation, may or may not occur. The examination of these high-level processes, building on theories such as Eco’s (1979) open/closed text model, Hall’s (1980) dominant/negotiated/oppositional audience positions (1980) or David Morley’s (1980) polysemic reception study, may be of scholarly interest; however, for a documentary practice that aims to primarily evoke emic experience not transfer meaning (though meaning-making is not denied), it would be impractical and distracting to theorise the mediation of meaning or knowledge, since the argument holds that these are built upon embodied experience.

This bottom-up approach is supported by cognitive film scholars such as Bordwell (2006) and Grodal (2009), phenomenological film scholars such as Sobchack (1992) and Wahlberg (2008), and neuroscientists such as Hasson *et al.* (2008) and Gallese and Guerra (2012). The homogeneity in low-level spectatorship is, according to Plantinga (2009b, pp. 255–256), based on hard-wired evolutionary physical and psychological attributes that account for collective responses and transcend (to a large extent) historical and cultural boundaries. In terms of my methodology, this transcendence only refers to the post-filmic stage of spectatorship, not to the entire mediation process. After all, my mediation process is indeed informed by top-down socio-cultural factors in relation to disability stereotypes, which primes the mediated experience from the pre-filmic to the post-filmic level. Overall, the mediation process I propose is not universalist, but takes into account both the bottom-up and top-down mechanisms of spectatorship (Bordwell, 1989a; Branigan, 1992; Persson, 2003; Brewer and Loschky, 2005), although, as discussed in Chapter Two, top-down considerations have been mostly neglected by cognitive film theorists (Plantinga, 2009b, p. 257).

Interestingly, the socio-cultural framing of my cognitive framework will reveal a quasi-hard-wired aspect of audience attitude when it comes to blind people. The content analysis in the next chapter will reveal a rather homogenous and rigid array of narrative and aesthetic stereotypes. This is not only due to a homogeneity in the use of folk-psychological narrative formulas in documentary filmmaking, but also to the uniform representations of blindness in other fields, such as philosophy and fine art, which has resulted in the fossilisation of persistent hegemonic structures. Consequently, it may be assumed that if an audience watches my films, their stereotypical dispositions towards blindness may largely be homogenous in terms of expectations and reconfigurations.

Another validation for assuming a post-filmically homogenous and experiential (rather than interpretative) audience response to my documentaries is Eitzen's (1995, p. 96) argument that documentary is a mode of reception (see Chapter Two), where audiences do not ask questions *per se* about the 'truthfulness', 'authenticity' or 'partiality' of the film text unless they have concrete

reasons to do so. If the audience is a public one, not connoisseurs or amateurs, these reasons can only lie in the film text,<sup>30</sup> not in the deployment of previous or critical knowledge.

Eitzen's case study for his theory is interesting insofar as it is not an observational or 'open text' documentary, but an expositional, historical documentary that uses predominantly archive material – Ken Burn's *The Civil War* (1991). The final scene of the first episode quotes from a sentimental love letter from a soldier to his wife, written shortly before his death. The voice-over is accompanied by a melancholy tune and a visual montage of portraits of soldiers and their wives, highlighting their faces and their linked hands (figure 8), and is followed by shots of a canon against a crimson sky. This scene, Eitzen suggests, involves a strong experiential involvement that goes beyond questions of 'truth claims', 'hidden agendas' and 'argumentative persuasion' (p. 87). Indexical questions – for example, whether the letter is actually from one of the soldiers in the pictures, or whether the canon has been planted in the field as a film prop – are secondary to the critical reflections on patriotism, secession and slavery. Eitzen's claim of the experiential impact of this sequence is supported by audience responses, consisting of reviews, inquiries received by the broadcaster, news announcements and an audience research study (p. 100).

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<sup>30</sup> This is the case, for example, in Marcel Lozinski's film *Anything Can Happen* (1995), where the cinematographic and aural attributes of the text may well prompt the viewer to ask questions about voyeuristic authorship. I would argue that viewers would not actually *ask* these questions, but simply assume that the filmmaker filmed the unknowing subjects from a covert vantage point. So, whether viewers reflexively ask indexical questions, or implicitly experience an act of skewed or unethical authenticity, documentary spectatorship is constituted by the reception of – to use semiotic terminology – the 'signifier', not the 'sign' as a whole, neither its intentional construction, nor the indexical 'signified'. This shows that, at least in terms of spectatorship, a semiotic model and issues of indexicality would be largely irrelevant, since only the signifier (the film text) and the viewer's perception of it matters.



Figure 8: *The Civil War* (1991)

However, authorship and deep reflexivity can also provide an embodied experience. Consider the scene in *Drinking for England* (1998), where one of the characters suddenly switches from talking about his alcohol habits to singing about them (figure 9). This was Hill's first documentary musical, and his technique of switching between interviews and musical numbers is likely to have provoked an unsettling reflexive jolt in the audience, challenging not only their documentary schemas, but also showcasing the filmmaker's creative virtuosity. Since this style is consistent throughout the film, and given the naïve joviality of the moment when the interview transforms into the singing scene embodies the character's attitude towards drinking and to life in general, the spectator is likely to experience this moment in a corresponding (if unusual) way, without questioning Hill's intentions or the character's mediocre singing abilities.

Interview: talking



Musical: singing



Figure 9: *Drinking for England* (1998) – talking/singing

Lastly, the conceptualisation of my film texts will also use three strategies that foster homogenous experiential responses while minimising narrative comprehension and dispersing high-level interpretations. Firstly, folk-psychological narrative formulas and thematic symbolism will be actively avoided, since, as the next chapter argues, these are recipes for othering and stereotyping blind people. Secondly, the deployment of narrative gaps, openness and ambiguity will be given priority over totalised and schematic character expositions. Thirdly, the focus on fragmented, everyday events in Terry's and June's lives will reduce the impetus for larger developments and their comprehension, highlighting unique, momentary experiences. It will be argued that the everyday is iconic rather than symbolic. Fundamentally, it is what it is, just like the drunkenness scene in *Drinking for England*, which is portrayed as an ordinary, everyday occurrence in the characters' lives.

#### **3.5.4 Spectatorship models for formalising emic experience**

The previous chapter has established the benefits of a cognitive approach. As it explores the mediation between filmmaker, screen character, film text and spectator, and hypothesises the audience as a collective by gauging spectator dispositions, this approach especially lends itself to the theorisation of post-filmic experience. However, the post-structuralist, apparatus-psychoanalytic, semiological *Screen* theory offers in principle an alternative spectatorship approach. Shaun Moores (1993, p. 13) observes that its aim is to reveal ideological "symbolic mechanisms through which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon readers, sewing them into the film narrative through the production of subject positions". In relation to my methodology, however, this objective carries two problems which tend to arise to different degrees in contemporary theories in the *Screen* tradition. Firstly, the film text is seen not as a mode of reception but as a commodity, appropriating the passive viewer via the only possible position in the text (p. 15). This fixed position is one of ideology, meaning and interpellation based on Lacan's mirror model, and it denies the possibility of polysemic readings (p. 16). The interpellation of subject positions is seen as the foundation of spectatorship, a

template that moulds any type of filmic experience – an understanding that is very remote from my proposition that (embodied) experience is the foundation of spectatorship, and may also serve as the foundation of polysemic meaning-making.

Secondly, spectatorship is seen to be hedonistically motivated by mechanisms originating in Freudian or Lacanian versions of the unconscious. Mechanisms such as voyeurism, fetishism, narcissism and psychosexual fantasies, most of which generate different types of desire, channel the spectator toward “repression or socially acceptable patterns of subjectivity” (Plantinga, 2009b, p. 253). Film cognitivists argue that this focus on the unconscious neglects the interaction between perceptual, emotive and cognitive processes, and claim that the rational/irrational dichotomy holds theoretical dangers, opting rather to analyse ‘pre-conscious’ (for example, somatic perception) and ‘conscious’ (for example, cognitive hypothesising) responses.

Although, as the previous chapter shows, cognitive film theory offers essential tools with which to explore pre-conscious and conscious audience responses, post-filmic methods need not be exclusively rooted in cognitive film studies. Neo-formalist and even folk-psychological assumptions can prove useful when conceptualising aesthetics, in particular; however, these will predominantly be ‘regimented’ by the insights provided by cognitive psychology. Although the actual methods will be deployed in the practice chapters, some preliminary considerations need to be made, since the conceptualisation of post-filmic experience needs to adhere to the parameters of emic experience, as identified on the pre-filmic level.

### **3.5.5 Film form and emic experience**

Emic experience is pre-filmically manifested in the situated interaction between body and physical space, which needs to be post-filmically experienced through aesthetics. Siegfried Kracauer (1960, p. 198) proposes that aesthetic apprehension requires the experience of actual phenomena in the physical world. Film is capable of rendering visible what we could not see before, enabling us to grasp the flow of

corporeal life through its psycho-physical correspondences, but it must actually *show* what these portray (p. 300). Kracauer's focus here is on physical space and situatedness, a concept that is similar to Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body's 'spatial anchoring', discussed earlier, which (in post-filmic terms) dictates a holistic, aesthetic apprehension of the body. This strategy not only reveals exterior, but also interior emic experience. As Persson (2003, p. 160) confirms, portrayals of the screen character's external bodily phenomena (mimicry, gesture and noise, for example) are experienced by a spectator as bearing a causal relationship to internal bodily phenomena such as sensations, feelings and emotions.

It may seem superfluous to mention post-filmic situatedness, since conventional, character-driven documentaries are empirical by nature, depicting characters performing concrete actions in concrete places. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter Four, there are several examples of films where the blind person's body is omitted for the entirety of the film, or examples where the spatial anchoring of the body is missing because of the overuse of close-ups that atomise body parts. These aesthetic experimentations, it could be argued, contradict the notion of emic experience, resulting in the othering of blind people. Consequently, the post-filmic mediation of bodily situatedness is not a secondary point and will be analysed extensively in Chapter Five. As Kracauer (1960, p. 301) warns, the mediation of the physicality of bodies and objects is not inherent to film form, since avant-garde films or films influenced by theatre and fine art tend to an abstract portrayal by distorting or removing them from their natural context.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated earlier with the examples of Burn's and Hill's documentaries, film form does not have to be observational or resort to wide shots and long takes alone to mediate embodied emic experience through situatedness. Several scenes in my films mediate emic experience through archive material, overlaid timelines, close-ups of objects and filmmaker-character interactions. Kracauer points out that the mediation of physical space in film does not presuppose present space, but can also include the past, the fantastical and even abstract ideas as long as the film form focuses on concrete things within concrete

moments (p. 303).<sup>31</sup> Thus, an approach to film form that focuses on situatedness also needs to manifest the temporality of situatedness by emphasising the particularity of the moment. Pepita Hesselberth (2014, pp. 94–96) terms this the event’s ‘presence’ – that is, presence, not in a metaphysical sense, but “being within reach”, tangible to the spectator and tied to on-screen actions (or action affordances) that emerge from the situatedness within a physical space. Chapter Six will explore narrative-related strategies that mediate the particularity of the moment.

Based on the above considerations, cognitive models deployed on a post-filmic level need to address audience experience of what Kaitlin Brunick *et al.* (2013, p. 133) call the ‘low-level features’ of film, which comprise any “physical, quantitative aspect that occurs regardless of the narrative”. Using Kracauer’s terms, low-level features constitute the temporal flow of aesthetic film elements (for example, the shot’s composition, framing, colour, movement and temporal structure) in which the screen character’s emic experience and the audience’s experience are simultaneously anchored. As mentioned in the previous chapter, spectatorship models predominantly analyse films in a top-down<sup>32</sup> manner, where narratives appear to subordinate and determine low-level elements, but Brunick *et al.* suggest that in some cases low-level elements may well be determinants of the narrative’s meaning. My thesis adopts this bottom-up approach, since one core post-filmic aim is to avoid folk-psychological narrative patterns, instead focusing on momentary, low-level experiences. As discussed later in the thesis, the sum of individually experienced scenes about everydayness in my two films determines the overall narrative experience in relation to everydayness, and that is why individual scenes and momentary experiences will be discussed in Chapter Five before exploring narrative structure and global experience in Chapter Six.

Finally, as cognitive studies on documentary are very limited (see Chapter Two), it is necessary to consider adopting fiction models instead, and this inevitably

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<sup>31</sup> Kracauer’s ‘moment’ relates to large narratives; it does not denote an instance, but a short event like a film scene. This thesis adopts this interpretation of the term.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Top-down’ is here understood within the context of aesthetic perception, not social, cultural or historical contextualisation, which, as already established, is neglected in cognitive film studies. This thesis uses social cognition models to compensate.

raises the issue of the difference between documentary and fiction spectators. For example, Bondebjerg (1994, p. 14) explains that, unlike fiction, the documentary audience assumes there is a more direct and causal link between the film images and the pro-filmic event; they tend to make direct assumptions about the pro-filmic reality and its relation to the mediated version, as well as to the public and private reality of everyday life. Eitzen (1995, pp. 93–95) argues that under particular circumstances the documentary spectator, in contrast to the fiction spectator, may ask different ethical questions regarding the role of the author in relation to the pro-filmic event (as mediated), as well as to the actual filmic mediation of that event.

The indexical, ethical and authorship-related questions Bondebjerg and Eitzen allude to are ‘high-level’ assumptions that, in relation to Eitzen’s earlier point, are triggered by the text and not by audience dispositions, especially with a public audience. Also, given that I employ strategies that encourage the post-filmic mediation of a largely homogenous embodied experience based on momentary, low-level responses, either the audience will not engage in indexical reflections concerning authorship, or these engagements will be a supplement to embodied experience. However, the scenes where authorship is latently or overtly reflexive will be analysed accordingly, taking my own embodied experience into account, but the decision as to whether this occurs or not will be made on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, my use of MacDougall’s (1998, p. 89) concept of ‘deep reflexivity’ (described earlier) encourages the audience to primarily experience my authorial position as embodied in the work, “whatever the external explanations may be”.

All in all, there is a large repository of cognitive fiction models available for my purposes, as long as – in a bricolage manner – the models are adapted to the particular indexical, ethical and authorship-related circumstances of the case at hand. With regards to ethnographic documentary, MacDougall (1998) highlights the value of fiction cinema techniques to produce “complex constructions of the social experience of individuals” (p. 67), and theorises the mediation of affective knowledge (or emic experience) using Deleuze’s (fiction) film image model (p. 82).

### 3.6 Ethics

The relation between ethics and filmic mediation is summed up by Calvin Pryluck (2005, p. 195), when he writes that “ethical assumptions have aesthetic consequences, and aesthetic assumptions have ethical consequences”. As Emmanuel Levinas (1989, pp. 82–83) explains in more fundamental terms, when one individual confronts another face-to-face this has consequences, and the one is indebted to the other. This is especially the case if a sighted filmmaker (or spectator) encounters a blind character. In my case, as a sighted filmmaker filming with blind people, this involves two notions of otherness, and these have ethical implications. On the pre-filmic level, Levinas’ phenomenological concept of the other operates in my encounter with Terry and June: the strong disparities in ability (sighted/blind), age (middle-aged/elderly) and culture (Austrian/British) widen the gap between us. However, on the post-filmic level, I am attempting to undo the hegemonic concept of the other, as identified in the content analysis in Chapter Four. The fundamental ethical frame in which this project operates is the attempt to deconstruct hegemonic stereotypes of blind people. From this perspective, adhering to a critical theorisation of documentary practice is not simply an academic exercise, but an ethical venture.

However, ethical choices cannot be settled *a priori* by formalised rules or possibly inappropriate assumptions (Pryluck, 2005, p. 195). For Derrida (2002, p. 231), it is ethically and politically irresponsible to base *any* decision (whether in filmmaking or film analysis) on previously set rules; if the theoretical analysis of a particular situation predetermines the decision, then it is not a decision but the mere application of previous knowledge based on a cause-and-effect relationship, like pressing a button to turn on a machine. An ethical decision in particular needs to be heterogeneous insofar as past knowledge is concerned, using socio-cultural norms and individual cognitive schemas in a bricolage manner adapted to the situation. As a consequence, ethical issues in this thesis will be discussed if they arise during the practice chapters; however, given its spectatorship-focused scope, the priority will be given to ethical discussions that have implications for spectatorship – that is, primarily on a post-filmic level.

It is interesting to note that the documentary practice textbooks mentioned in the previous chapter scarcely merit a mention in the discussion on ethics. When it comes to dealing with subjects like consent, they prescribe common industry practices that, although proven to be efficient working standards, are usually not questioned or contextualised in terms of representation. This could be seen as an attempt to follow Derrida's logic, or it could simply be a conscious choice to avoid obscuring film practice by adding no more theory than absolutely necessary. It may well be both. As Rabiger (2004, p. 247) declares, "[a]ny discussion of ethics makes the responsibility of documentary sound very burdensome".

### **3.7 Conclusion**

In short, the major weakness of theorising audience responses is the lack of actual verification. However, an audience research study would be impractical for documentary making. The only pragmatic way to critically theorise my practice is a theoretical hypothesis that considers the audience's textual response in relation to their blindness-related dispositions – one that is built around postulating a largely homogenous and fundamental experiential response to the momentary occurrence of low-level filmic elements. This experiential response, which is embodied in the film text, does not preclude high-level responses such as interpretation (whether polysemic or not); rather, it serves as a foundation for them. However, since a theorisation of these high-level responses is problematic when it comes to conceptualising film practice, the entire practice component explores spectatorship on an experiential level, including the content analysis.

The next chapter presents the content analysis and its evaluation, which directly feeds into the filming and editing practice detailed in the subsequent two chapters. Although the following chapter does not involve the activity of filmmaking, it should still be regarded as research practice, framing the actual documentary practice. It examines spectator dispositions towards disability, and lays out what needs to be mapped on the pre-filmic level and eventually mediated to the audience on the post-filmic level.

## Chapter Four: The Framing of Documentary Practice

### 4.1 Introduction

Following the methodology in the previous chapter, this chapter uses content analysis to investigate spectators' dispositions regarding blind characters in documentary film. This approach, when employed not just as a methodology but as an inherent part of the case study, reveals that blindness (and disability in general) is framed in a specific socio-cultural way, resulting in filmic stereotypes that in turn perpetuate a particular rendition of blind characters. The identification of these stereotypes serves as a foundation for the conception of strategies that attempt to reduce the sense of otherness. Whereas the previous chapter identified the mediation of emic experience as a means of reducing otherness in general, this chapter explores what exactly that emic experience should consist of when applied to the othering of blind people.

In line with the funnel structure approach (see Chapter One), the content analysis and its implementation as part of my film practice occurred progressively, in synchrony with the actual production process. The urge to scrutinise other documentaries about blindness emerged during my initial encounters with Terry and June. Prompted by the discrepancy between my first-hand experience of the characters and my own dispositions as a filmmaker and spectator, fuelled by art, literature and media portrayals, I became increasingly aware of my own formulaic, textbook approach to their filmic portrayal – an awareness that was further deepened by consulting disability studies literature. In effect, my encounters with them triggered not only the content analysis, but also the critical analysis of documentary filmmaking textbooks which became the impetus for the entire methodology.

First, the chapter presents the content analysis. This consists of a survey of films featuring blind characters and identifies common tropes in their narrative and aesthetic approaches that follow the formulas laid down in filmmaking textbooks. The survey results are framed by insights afforded by disability studies, which

confirm that these tropes establish othering stereotypes. Since this thesis is located in documentary practice, however, the literature is used primarily to provide supporting arguments that relate to the pragmatics of filmmaking and its critical framing; it is beyond the scope of this project to engage in a theoretical discourse on disability.

Next, alternative representations of blind characters are suggested by linking emic experience to ordinary, everyday experience. This type of emic experience needs to be accompanied by an attempt to ‘particularise’ the blind characters in order to prevent the universal and totalising mediations, observed in the sample of films under investigation in this chapter, which homogenise the experience of blind people and thus enable the generation of schematic stereotypes. These insights will be used in the subsequent chapters to inform the construction of particular methods of pre-filmic and post-filmic mediation.

## 4.2 Current media representations of blindness

### 4.2.1 Sampling

The films below (table 1) have been selected on the basis of the sampling criteria discussed in the previous chapter. They are exclusively audio-visual, time-based documentaries, reflecting the field of practice which is the locus of my work.<sup>33 34</sup>

Documentary	Exhibition/Distribution (selection)
<i>Window of the Soul</i> (2001) Directed by Walter Carvalho and João Jardim. Brazil.	Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (2002); Paris Brazilian Film Festival (2002); St. Petersburg Message to Man Film Festival (2002); Palm Springs International Film Festival (2003); Cannes Film Festival (2003). Theatrical release in Germany (2004) and France (2004)

<sup>33</sup> For a comprehensive selection of fiction and non-fiction films portraying disability (including examples of blindness), see Beth A. Haller’s website <https://mediadisability.wordpress.com/films-tv-documentaries/>.

<sup>34</sup> Although my 2004 documentary, *A Touch of Colour*, would be a likely candidate for the content analysis in terms of stereotypical media representations, I chose not to include it because the festivals where it was shown were mainly niche, disability film festivals, attracting the connoisseur or amateur rather than a public audience.

<i>In the Dark</i> (2004) Directed by Sergey Dvortsevov. Russia.	International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (2004); Cracow Film Festival (2004); Rencontres Internationales de Cinéma à Paris (2004); European Feature Documentary Film Festival – Belgrade (2005). Broadcast on Arte France 4, SVT and YLE
<i>Black Sun</i> (2005) Directed by Gary Tarn. USA.	Toronto International Film Festival (2005); Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (2006); Transilvania International Film Festival (2006); European Feature Documentary Film Festival – Belgrade (2007); Wisconsin Film Festival (2007)
<i>Blindsight</i> (2006) Directed by Lucy Walker. UK.	Toronto International Film Festival (2006); London Film Festival (2006); Berlin International Film Festival (2007); Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (2007); Trento Film Festival (2008); Palm Springs International Film Festival (2008); AFI Film Festival (2008). Theatrical release in the US (2008)
<i>Extraordinary People: The Boy who sees without Eyes</i> (2007) Directed by Elliot McCaffrey. UK.	Broadcast on Channel 5 <a href="http://www.channel5.com/episode/extraordinary-people-the-boy-who-sees-without-eyes">http://www.channel5.com/episode/extraordinary-people-the-boy-who-sees-without-eyes</a>
<i>Antoine</i> (2008) Directed by Laura Bari. Canada.	Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal (2008); Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (2010); Reykjavik International Film Festival (2009); Vancouver International Film Festival (2009); Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival (2009); Tribeca Film Festival (2009); Salt Lake City Film Festival (2009); Göteborg International Film Festival (2010)
<i>Victory Over Darkness</i> (2008) Directed by Donnie Eichar. USA.	Heartland Film Festival (2008)
<i>Going Blind</i> (2010) Directed by Joseph Lovett. USA.	Limited theatrical release in the US (2010); broadcast on Finnish TV; broadcast on WNYEDT and WGVU
<i>Planet of Snail</i> (2012) Directed by Seung-Jun Yi. South Korea.	International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (2011); Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (2012); Tribeca Film Festival (2012); Documenta Madrid (2012); Docville (2012); Silverdocs Film Festival (2012). Broadcast in Finland and Sweden
<i>High Ground</i> (2012) Directed by Mike Brown. USA.	Seattle International Film Festival (2012), Newport Beach International Film Festival (2012); limited theatrical release in the US (2012), on-demand on Netflix
'Damien' (2013) <i>The Undateables</i> , Season 2, episode 3. Directed by Chris McLaughlin and Kathryn Tregidgo. UK.	Broadcast on Channel 4 <a href="http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-undateables/videos/all/s2-ep3-damian">http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-undateables/videos/all/s2-ep3-damian</a>
<i>Notes on Blindness</i> (2016) Directed by Peter Middleton and James Spinney. UK.	San Francisco International Film Festival (2016); Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival (2016); Tribeca Film Festival (2016); Sydney International Film Festival (2016); Sundance Film Festival (2016). Broadcast on BBC 4 and Arte

	(2016/7)
<i>Across Still Water</i> (2015) Directed by Ruth Grimberg. UK.	BFI London Film Festival (2014); Aesthetica Short Film Festival (2015); Big Sky Documentary Film Festival (2016); London Short Film Festival (2015); DocuWest International Film Festival (2015)
'See the Need' (2015) RNIB campaign. UK. <sup>35</sup>	<a href="http://www.rnib.org.uk/see">http://www.rnib.org.uk/see</a> Twitter (#seetheneed)

**Table 1: Documentaries featuring blindness**

The evaluation of the films can be divided across the two categories of stereotype that Dyer (2006) identifies for film texts: 'structural' (or 'narrative') stereotypes include the material and ideological organisation of the world depicted, as well as the actual plot (p. 358); 'iconographic' (or 'aesthetic') stereotypes relate to visual and aural signs present in the cinematography, sound and editing (p. 357).<sup>36</sup> The following textual analysis highlights these films' use of narrative and aesthetic folk-psychology formulas, which aim to engage the audience with the characters by means of empathy, emotion, dramatic narrative arcs and aesthetic stimulation. As discussed in Chapter Two, filmmakers' use of folk-psychological filmic treatments resonates with human perception and cognition in real life, and is therefore an efficient tool for gauging spectatorship. However, its predominantly non-critical use, perpetuating easily recognisable role and event schemas (a key recipe for succeeding with a public audience), disregards aspects of social cognition and representation that can lead to the stereotyping and othering of particular communities. Thus, an analysis of folk-psychological narrative and aesthetic strategies, in conjunction with insights from disability studies, should give a good overview of spectatorship dispositions in relation to films depicting blindness.

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<sup>35</sup> These short RNIB films, whose primary aim is to raise awareness and funds for the campaign, are considered documentary promos. Hence, they do not strictly conform to my own documentary practice. However, as they are deliberately targeted at a wide audience, they are used here as a case study in the attempt to identify common stereotypes of blindness in non-fiction audio-visual media.

<sup>36</sup> Arguably, there is a third category of stereotypes, namely the programming and labelling of films. This category would explore the 'ghettoisation' of films about blindness into disability or pathology-related strands or festivals, and their signposting through paratexts, such as main titles, trailers and synopses, revealing the cognitive categorisation mechanism Macrae and Bodenhausen (2001) describe (see Chapter Three). Unfortunately, this category would fall outside the scope of this thesis, and would be marginal to the actual conceptualisation of the films.

#### 4.2.2 Evaluation of narrative stereotypes

##### *Blindness and the journey of the 'supercrip'*

All of the above films aim to engage the viewer with the emotional world of their blind characters (in the folk-psychological manner promulgated in filmmaking textbooks); they prompt the audience to understand the characters' motivations, empathise with them, and feel as if they themselves are undertaking the narrative journey, in which blindness is the cohesive narrative force that drives the plot. The most popular folk-psychological narrative journey is the 'supercrip' journey found in *Blindsight* (2006), *High Ground* (2012) and *Victory over Darkness* (2008). The 'supercripple' (or 'supercrip'), as Colin Barnes (1992, p. 12) explains, is a stereotype that assigns super-human, almost magical abilities to disabled people, in order to elicit respect from the abled-bodied.

*Blindsight* tells the story of six blind Tibetan teenagers attempting to climb a mountain in the Himalayas. At the beginning, the film establishes that many Tibetans consider blindness a curse, and this immediately sets up the characters' primary narrative goal of overcoming social stigmatisation in their community. The seemingly impossible, physical journey represents a parallel, spiritual process of transformation, at the end of which the characters feel themselves validated as members of society. A very similar storyline occurs in *High Ground*, where eleven war veterans with different mental and physical injuries – one was blinded by a bomb – also climb a mountain in the Himalayas. The blind character, Steve Baskis, grows increasingly more confident throughout the journey, especially when moving through rough terrain. Meanwhile, in *Victory over Darkness*, the heroic struggle to overcome physical impairment and gain social acceptance is performed by five blind athletes competing in the ironman triathlon.

All three plots place the blind characters in specific schematic roles, resembling characters in fiction films who have to overcome trauma, exclusion or bitterness by undergoing a significant physical or mental transformation (Pointon, 1997, p. 87). At the narrative's beginning, the characters are presented through a role schema pertaining to either one or a combination of six disability stereotypes

often deployed by media: the 'pitiable and pathetic', the 'better-dead', the 'bitter and self-pitying', the 'burden' and the 'unable to live a successful life' (see Barnes, 1992; Nelson, 1994). Adhering to folk-psychological storytelling formulas, the negative role schema progressively and cathartically changes during the journey into its positive, binary opposite, the 'supercrip' stereotype, and the journey ends on an uplifting, inspirational note.

### *Blindness and the tragic journey*

Pointon (1997, p. 88) identifies a narrative arc focusing on the tragic progress of blindness in the characters, as in *Notes on Blindness* (2016), *Going Blind* (2010) and *Across Still Water* (2015). In these films, recently blinded or partially sighted characters attempt to come to terms with the inevitable progression towards a total loss of vision.

*Notes on Blindness* begins with the establishment of loss in general. In the first act, the main character, John Hull, describes through a voice-over the physical effect of his loss of vision (represented by a myriad of semi-dark and out-of-focus shots), especially in relation to no longer being able to see his wife and children yet retaining a visual memory of their physical appearance. In the second act, his wife explains how his loss of sight impairs their relationship, since *his* lack of the ability to 'see' and *her* lack of the ability 'to-be-seen' have a negative impact on their affective interpersonal experience. The second act continues with John describing his emotional decline, losing himself in "loneliness and nothingness", and "a sense of impending doom". John's emotional state is carefully plotted so that it progressively gets worse until it reaches its lowest point, where he accepts that "there is no escape". This is the climax of the second act. In the third act, John starts to appreciate and rely on his other senses (especially hearing), and begins to come to terms with his blindness.

Similarly, in the first act of *Across Still Water*, we meet the main character, John Chapman, who is losing his vision, as he takes a night-fishing trip, where he describes how his visual perception is slowly fading and how much he will miss being able to drive. The second act shows his interactions first with his mother and

then with a blind friend, who both try to convince him to get a cane and a guide dog to help him to maintain his independence and avoid car accidents. In act three, John is night-fishing once again; he explains that he has decided to begin training to use the cane and is planning to get a guide dog. The film finishes on an optimistic note, as John also indicates that he will continue fishing. After landing a large carp, he gazes into the darkness and listens to the distant call of a bird, suggesting that his aural sense will compensate for his loss of vision.

*Going Blind* equally establishes a first act in which the main character (who also made the film), Joseph Lovett, expresses his fear of blindness, which in his case is caused by glaucoma. Loss of vision is underlined by loss of physical activity, such as the ability to ride a bike. During the second act, Joseph meets a variety of visually impaired people and explores how they cope with being blind. The third act concludes with all the characters looking optimistically into the future and describing how they have overcome the obstacles they faced due to their loss of vision. This positive development is mirrored by Joseph's attitude towards the future.

In terms of stereotypical role schemas, the tragic journey documentary establishes two sets of binary opposites. At the beginning, the blind character who is losing his/her sight is portrayed as either 'bitter and self-pitying', a 'burden' or 'unable to live a successful life', but these schemas are juxtaposed with the character's formerly 'normal', abled self in order to emphasise the tragedy of their loss. At the end, the character has converted his/her fear of or bitterness about becoming blind into optimism about living a new and different life – once again, the plot concludes on a positive, inspirational note. It is the archetypical death and rebirth/renewal theme found in numerous Western literary works (see, for example, Bloom and Hobby, 2009).

### *Spectatorship and narrative*

Narrative arcs, such as the 'supercrip' and the 'tragic journey', are consciously constructed by filmmakers to engage their audience. By carefully selecting what events to film, how to film them and in what order to edit them together,

filmmakers follow an array of specific narrative rules laid down by folk psychology.

In *Documentary Storytelling*, Bernard (2007) declares:

Telling a story for emotional impact means that the filmmaker is structuring the story so that the moments of conflict, climax, and resolution – moments of achievement, loss, reversal, etc. – adhere as well as possible to the internal rhythms of storytelling. Audiences expect that the tension in a story will escalate as the story moves toward its conclusion; scenes tend to get shorter, action tighter, the stakes higher. (Bernard, 2007, p. 28)

Like Bernard, de Jong *et al.* (2012) and Rabiger (2004) propose that a documentary narrative should in general follow a three-act plot structure,<sup>37</sup> based on Aristotle's *Poetics*, which establishes a character-led journey from the establishment of the problem to be overcome, through a process of surmounting a series of obstacles that become increasingly severe, to the climax or confrontation that resolves the problem in a way that is emotionally satisfying for the audience. The need to portray the progressive build-up of obstacles in order to create dramatic tension even appears to justify a certain amount of flexibility when it comes to the authenticity of the timing of real-life events. As Bernard (2007, p. 76) asserts, the chronology of the plot does not have to adhere to the chronology of the real-life story as long as the "important facts of the main underlying chronology" remain unchanged. The tension between the character's aims and his/her ability to overcome all the obstacles in their path is seen as a prerequisite if the audience is to identify with characters (de Jong *et al.*, 2012, p. 124). This folk-psychological approach to narrative structuring ensures that the audience feels they have access to the characters' minds, understanding their thoughts and motivations, experiencing corresponding emotions, and empathising with their screen personas.

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<sup>37</sup> Without any scientific basis, Rabiger (2004, p. 80) even suggests that the classic three-act division is naturally inherent to every aspect of life, since according to him, human life consists of cycles that break down into problem, intensification of complications, climax and resolution.

### *Uplifting treatment*

What is interesting in the 'supercrip' and 'tragic journey' documentary is the combination of two types of journeys: a physical and a spiritual. This is a common folk-psychological strategy for character-driven documentaries, as the spiritual journey highlights the human motivation that carries the plot forward until psychological growth is achieved. However, the spiritual journey is also used to add a more uplifting tone to the film and, to a certain extent, compensate for the 'misfortune' of being blind (Pointon, 1997, p. 88). All the films surveyed here exhibit a spiritual journey that concludes on a positive note.

For Charles Riley, the construction of an overall uplifting and positive plot is clearly a filmmaking decision based on spectatorship:

[Content producers] package disability in such a way as to safely ensure that the audience feels nobly uplifted, even ethically superior, for 'supporting' what is in effect a blatantly oversweetened version of life with disability as concocted by a community that cannot countenance physical imperfection except in certain sanctioned and saccharine forms. (Riley, 2005, p. 71)

This saccharine form is most palpable in *Antoine*, a documentary about a five-year-old blind boy. The narrative consists of a blending of Antoine's real life with the imaginary story he creates, in which he plays a private detective trying to solve the case of a missing person. The playful plot is injected with poetic imagery of his sensory experiences and humorous episodes, and has elicited a plethora of positive reviews and comments, such as "[the film is] an inspiration to children and adults alike, Antoine's real and imaginary lives are cleverly intertwined in this debut film, creating an homage to human resilience, optimism, and creativity".<sup>38</sup> The folk-psychological paradigm demands, of course, that the case Antoine is investigating is successfully resolved and he finds the missing person; narrative closure is essential for over-sweetened narrative packaging, since open or ambiguous endings may

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<sup>38</sup> This was a review by TriBeCa festival programmer Sara Nodjoumi: <https://tribecafilm.com/filmguide/archive/512cee2e1c7d76e046001377-antoine> (Accessed: 15/04/2015)

dissipate emotional or ethical elevation. Thus, all the above films establish clear initial goals that anticipate a concrete resolution. As documentary filmmaker Jessica Yu (cited in Riley, 2005, p. 90) comments, “people want closure ... the hero with a disability has to either get better or die. The idea of living with a disability is unacceptable.”

The uplifting narrative is especially used in reality TV documentaries on disability, such as the episode featuring Damien, a partially sighted character, in the Channel 4 series, *The Undateables* (2012- ). The general format of the series is uplifting and comedic, as demonstrated by its logo (figure 10) and the numerous references to the quirkiness of the disabled characters. Damien’s tragic journey of searching for a suitable partner is compensated by plenty of upbeat elements, such as his humorous interactions with his mother, the jaunty music and his apparently constant good mood. By the end of the programme he has a date, which goes well, although it remains open whether the pair is going to meet again. Still, in his closing interview, Damien expresses his optimism about the future. So, although the physical goal has not exactly been reached, the spiritual goal of gaining self-confidence has, and this closure is presented as almost more satisfying than finding an actual partner.

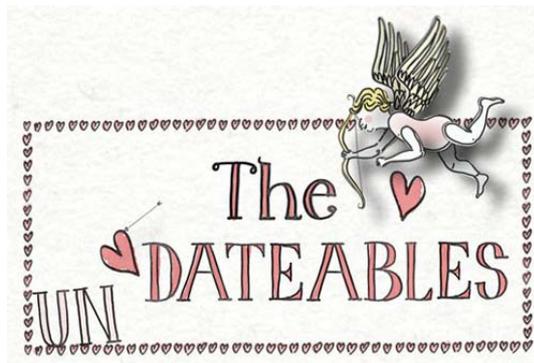


Figure 10: The logo of the Channel 4 series, *The Undateables* (2012- )

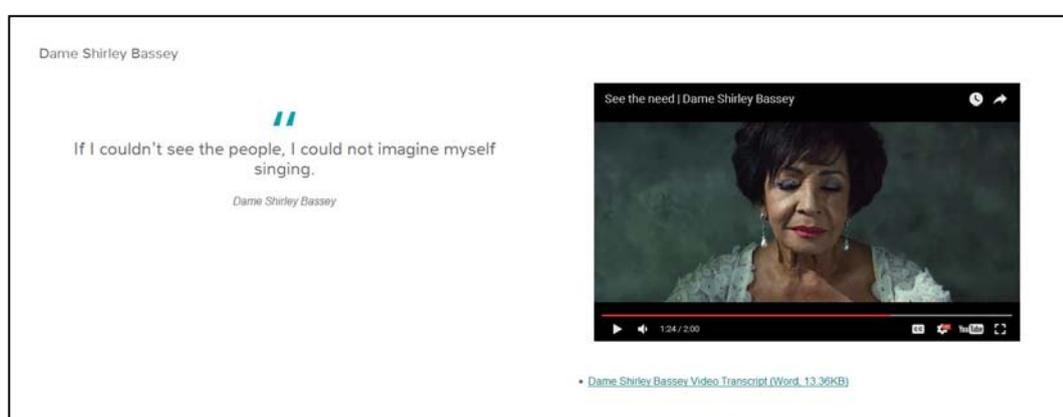
## *Fear*

Fear, a universal human emotion, plays an essential role in narratives about blind people. The 'supercrip' journey presents fear as one of the obstacles to achieving a physical and spiritual goal. Equally, the narrative of the tragic journey capitalises heavily on fear, as the main driver of the plot relates not to overcoming blindness, but to overcoming fear. According to Plantinga (2009a, p. 81), film narratives induce fear through paradigm scenarios in which the character's well-being and safety are threatened. These films strategically construct the feeling of fear in relation to the loss or forfeit of something, which is portrayed as jeopardising or, at the very least, compromising well-being. For the blind person, driving a car, riding a bike, walking along the pavement, cooking, maintaining emotional bonds with family members or finding a partner (as in *The Undateables*) are not only discussed but visualised in this sense. For instance, *Going Blind* shows Joseph riding a bike and almost colliding with a car, and *Across Still Water* shows John crossing a road with heavy traffic after his mother has voiced concerns that he is taking risks by not using a guide dog. Rendering common, everyday actions as life-threatening scenarios evokes a proxy fear in the audience – a fear of forfeiting basic skills and the ability to master simple, quotidian situations.

Interestingly, while the plot endings of tragic journeys suggest that the screen character has overcome any fears, they do not attempt to dissipate the audience's physical and social fear of blindness, which is presented as real and imminent, not as something that may be partly unsubstantiated or even socially constructed. Thus, the fear that is projected from the screen characters onto the audience prevails beyond the film's ending. Given that the fear of sight loss is a basic human instinct, it serves as a good marker of emotion in all films in this survey, and is the most common trope in films about blindness.

A prime example of the fear factor is the Royal National Institute for the Blind's (RNIB) (2015) recent 'See the Need' awareness-raising campaign (figure 11). Aimed at addressing the lack of trained sight-loss advisers in the UK, the campaign comprises four short promotional documentaries featuring a sighted media celebrity (Shirley Bassey, Barbara Windsor, Ross Kemp and Neil Morrissey)

expressing how devastated they would feel if they were blind. Although well-intentioned, the films take the folk-psychological shortcut of establishing a conventional fear and pity-laden narrative, with the apparent goal of preventing (or alleviating) blindness at all costs. The entire campaign (which does not feature even one blind person) results in a negative and simplistic portrayal of blind people, reducing their experience to one of pure deficit, and perpetuating the supremacy of seeing (Bolt, 2015). Images of disabled people as pitiful, helpless, *disabled* and dependant on ongoing care have been repeatedly used in advertising campaigns to attract public support and donations (Rimmerman, 2013, p. 61).



**Figure 11: RNIB 'See the Need' campaign (2015)**

Of course, due to our ocular-centric society and the fact that (totally) blind people still constitute a minority of the population, it could be argued that a sighted audience experiences fear by default when encountering a blind person on screen or in real life. However, the problem is that filmmakers capitalise on this fear by reinforcing it through narrative and aesthetic means – for example, by focusing the narrative predominantly on the condition of being blind, instead of on other, unrelated aspects in the blind person's life.

### *Focus on the condition of blindness*

The titles of the films under scrutiny here immediately reveal their focus. Four titles include the word 'blind' and six use related metaphors about eyes, perception and darkness (for example, *Planet of Snail* – snails are blind). The title is the first encounter an audience has with the film text, whether in paratexts, such as trailers, brochures or event programmes, or at the start of a film. The titles of the above films potentially precondition viewers to perceive the screen characters solely through their blindness rather than other individual personal attributes, and this is further reinforced by taglines and film synopses, such as the Heartland film festival synopsis of *Victory Over Darkness*, which it describes as “the triumph of three blind individuals who defy both circumstance and boundaries society has imposed on the visually impaired”.<sup>39</sup> It can be assumed that this marketing strategy aims to attract an audience by promising they will experience not only a dramatic story, but also one that stimulates primordial fears by exhibiting a binary deviation from their most precious sensory organ. This is reflected by film titles such as *The Boy Who Sees Without Eyes*, *Blindsight* and *Black Sun*.

In the same vein, the narratives tend to focus on the characters' disability, omitting other major aspects of their lives. For instance, *Notes on Blindness* makes no reference to John Hull's distinguished academic career and his books on religious education. *Going Blind* hardly discusses Joseph Lovett's career as a filmmaker, especially the way the filmmaking process has helped him overcome his fear of blindness. *Across Still Water* does dwell on John Chapman's favourite hobby, night fishing, but this directorial choice is most likely related to the pitch-black darkness enshrouding the fishing scenes, which serves as a clear metaphor for his progression towards blindness. John is prompted to talk in a voice-over about his fear of losing his sight. The strong focus on this nocturnal activity severely limits the portrayal of John as interacting with other people in different spaces, resulting in the audience perceiving him simply as a fisherman who is going blind.

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<sup>39</sup> This synopsis can be found on the Heartland Film website: <http://heartlandfilm.org/movies/victory-over-darkness/> (Accessed: 15/03/2015)

The majority of films do not portray the diversity, complexity and ambiguity of the individual character traits of the blind person (Schillmeier, 2006; Badia Corbella and Sánchez-Guijo Acevedo, 2010), but conveniently stick to blindness for the story. Disabled film characters are one-dimensional and function only through their impairment; the use of disability as character traits, plot device or atmosphere is a lazy shortcut for writers and filmmakers to draw audiences into the story (Shakespeare, 1999). Blindness becomes, according to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000, p. 59) a “surface manifestation of internal symptomology” that stands for the equally abnormal subjectivity of the individual which serves as the driver for folk-psychological, *extraordinary* plot trajectories.

#### **4.2.3 Evaluation of aesthetic stereotypes**

##### *Blindness as spectacle*

Not all films focus on plot journeys, however. *Window of the Soul* and *Black Sun* highlight the actual aesthetic perception of blindness. Although they feature blind central characters, the episodic structure of both films revolves around the phenomenal qualities of visual perception in people with blindness. *Window of the Soul* is an anthology of interviews with nineteen people suffering from different kinds and degrees of visual impairment, who comment on their experience of perceiving and being perceived. While the film acknowledges a wide range of individual character complexities and nuances, all the characters ultimately refer to visual perception. Similarly, *Black Sun* is constructed episodically around the moving story of Hugues de Montalembert, a blind artist and filmmaker, who uses expressive imagery and poetic narration to reflect on his life without vision and on perception in general. These documentaries offer the audience a scopophilic opportunity to gaze in wonder and fascination on the gazing process itself. It is a type of ‘showcasing’, which objectifies blind people as deviant, albeit aesthetic beings, and as metaphors for visual perception itself. Blindness has indeed become a metaphor for deviance and deficiency in Western art and literature (Barasch, 2001; Schillmeier, 2006), and blind people have been metonymised through the

fabrication of a wealth of philosophical and poetic meanings around visual impairment that recreate them “as figures of speech, the component of a joke or a poem” (Rodas, 2009, p. 117).

This transformation of blindness into an aesthetic spectacle is present in most of the films in the survey, even those whose narrative themes are not about perception per se. The most significant trope is the folk-psychological attempt to approximate the audience’s experience to the emotions and perceptions of the characters by visualising the way blind people ‘see’ the world through the use of abstract, poetic and sensory imagery, often in the pretence that a scene is filmed from a subjective point of view, with shots that appear (spatially) as if filmed through the characters’ eyes (figures 12-17). This aesthetically stimulating imagery is achieved through distortion, colourisation, soft focus, the use of extreme close-ups of body parts that atomises aural, tactile and olfactory senses, and the chiaroscuro interplay of light and dark – the darkness usually subsumes most of the frame. This imagery occurs as recurrent motifs throughout the plots and is by no means incidental or accidental. It is usually further underlined by heightened sounds that evoke the intensified sensory perception of material surfaces or sound<sup>40</sup> (for example, in *Planet of Snail* and *Antoine*), or distorted sounds or atonal music that create an aural metaphor whose degree of abstraction corresponds to that of the image (for example, in *Notes on Blindness* and *Black Sun*). As a result, the characters’ ‘visual’ and non-visual senses are represented as having hyper-real or transcendental attributes.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Chion’s (1994, p. 114) ‘materialising sound indices’.

<sup>41</sup> Experimental films about blindness are especially resourceful in conceiving hyper-real and surreal aesthetic treatments. See, for example, *Planet of the Blind* (<http://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/filmedia/play/3306/Planet-of-the-Blind>) and *A Shift in Perception* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzlh2Ky61mQ>).



Figure 12: *Notes on Blindness* (2016)



Figure 13: *Extraordinary people: The Boy Who Sees Without Eyes* (2007)

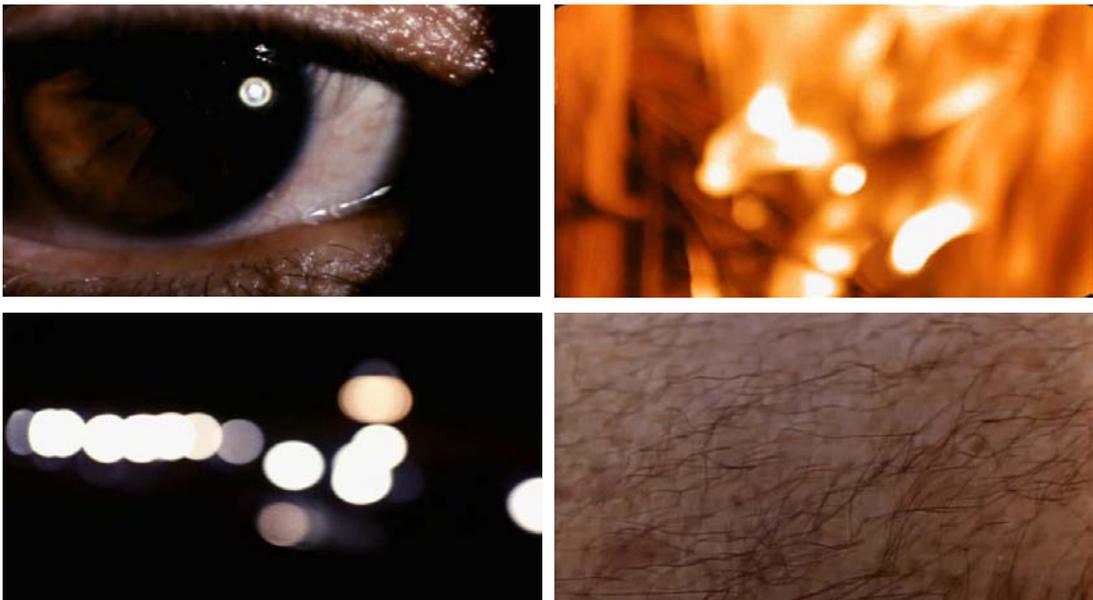


Figure 14: *Window of the Soul* (2001)



Figure 15: Planet of Snail (2012)

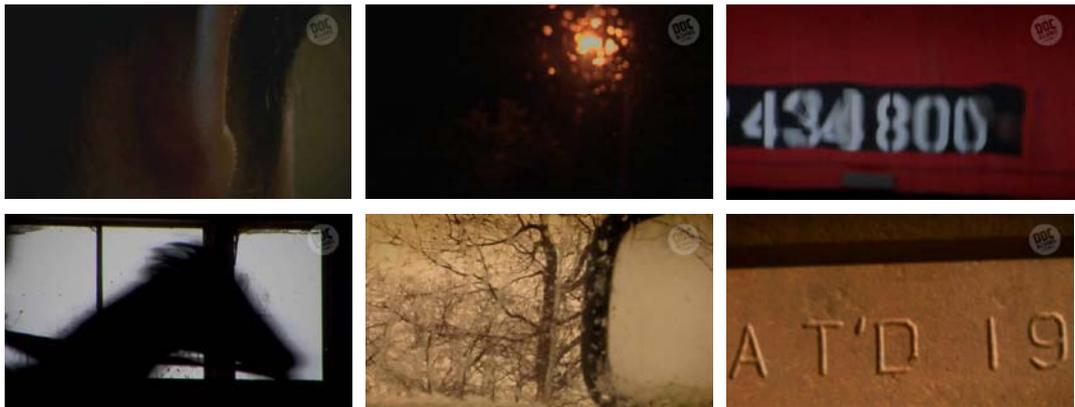


Figure 16: Antoine (2008)



Figure 17: *Black Sun* (2005)

### *Blindness and perception*

Neuroscientific evidence indeed suggests that in the absence of vision, other senses work as functional substitutes and are often improved (so-called ‘sensory compensation’), meaning that blind people do possess greater acuity in non-visual senses than sighted people (Cattaneo and Vecchi, 2011). Furthermore, blind people are capable of forming visual imagery that may vary in their degree of clarity and abstraction. Nevertheless, the attempt to visualise blind people’s perception in documentary film fetishises their bodies and mystifies their perceptions.<sup>42</sup> This is because, firstly, these aesthetic renderings are based on authorial experimentation

<sup>42</sup> In post-colonial discourse Homi Bhabha (1983) elaborates on the bodily fetishisation of the other as a colonial fantasy of objectification. Although Bhabha’s use of psychoanalytic ideas based on Freud and Lacan are parochial and abstract, there are still interesting parallels with othering blindness, especially in relation to how colonial identity responds to its cultural, ethnic and bodily contrast to the other’s identity, which is simultaneously perceived as ‘difference’ and ‘absence’:

[T]he fetish represents the simultaneous play between metaphor as substitution (masking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack). The fetish or stereotype gives access to an ‘identity’ which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse. (1983, p. 27)

rather than scientific data, and secondly, they are diametrically opposed to the way a sighted audience experiences their physical world.

Beate Ochsner and Robert Stock (2013, pp. 3–4) point out that the attempt to translate the sensory perception of the disabled body into audio-visual filmic terms leads inevitably to portraying blindness as a “different mode of perception that is simply marked deviant and not recognized as part of the complex practices of seeing”. This kind of imagery exoticises and objectifies blind people, and this results in the loss of the screen character’s individual identity and subjective experience (Ayisi and Brylla, 2013), turning him/her into a curiosity for the audience to *look at* rather than *experience with*. Consequently, such filmic attempts to visualise blind people’s subjective perception are prone to backfire and end up othering them even further.

#### *Abstracting space*

This aesthetic othering is also elicited by films attempting to heighten the sensory experience through non-visual senses by fragmenting the body and its surrounding space. For instance, the abundant use of close-ups in *Notes on Blindness* deconstructs and abstracts space. In direct contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘intentional threads’ (see Chapter Three), the body is unanchored from its space and subjective experience is robbed of its situatedness. Consequently, if actions are depicted only in close shots without establishing shots, as happens in the above films, these actions become disembodied and fetishised, and the audience experiences them as pure aesthetics rather than the subjective experience of a human agent.

Spatial anchoring can also be lost if the body on screen is completely omitted, as is the case in *Black Sun*, where we never see the body or face of the character but only hear his voice over subjective point-of-view shots. This disembodiment also occurs in *Notes on Blindness* for a large part of the film, and like in *Black Sun*, hearing the real character’s voice without seeing his body emphasises the somatic absence; in addition, when the character appears, it is an actor, not the actual John Hull. The omission of face and body counteracts the

audience's engagement with the characters in general (Smith, 1994). Due to this omission, there is no chance of a material and corporeal encounter between spectator and character. The spectator never experiences the ethical implications of responsibility for the phenomenological other – as in Levinas' ethics of the personal encounter (see Chapter Three) – or is prompted to interrogate, for example, authorial (or spectatorial) voyeurism, spectacularisation or stereotyping. This reduction of self-reflexivity on the part of the audience is also informed by the stylised authorship, which by means of artistic virtuosity demonstrates an admiration of its own elegance rather than the aim of portraying emic experience. The resulting etic experience creates a safety buffer between spectator and disabled character – a cushion that absorbs uncomfortable ethical questions on the spectator's and the filmmaker's part. What the spectator experiences is not a mediation of the blind character's perceptions, but a mediation of what the author imagines blind perception to be.

### *Darkness*

Another aesthetic trope is darkness, as seen in the images above (figures 12-17) and indicated by several of the film titles (*Black Sun*, *In the Dark* and *Victory over Darkness*). Blindness is often metonymised through darkness (Rodas, 2009, p. 127), and the notion of darkness capitalises on the audience's primordial fear of loss of sight, which is linked to loss of knowledge. This fear can be traced back to Enlightenment thought: Michael Schillmeier (2006) observes that Locke's empiricist theories, according to which human knowledge and visual perception are linked, and his related references to Plato's cave, have contributed to the consolidation of an ocular-centric paradigm in Western society that has prevailed to this day. According to this paradigm, lack of vision indicates a deficiency in perception, with the shift from light to dark signifying a descent into a state of epistemological ignorance (p. 472).

Consequently, darkness (or rather the absence of light) has become a cognitive metaphor for particular sensations, emotions and meanings, including ignorance, insecurity, uncertainty, mystery, evil and fear. Cognitive metaphors are

embodied image schemas that render abstract concepts as empirically perceivable and shareable data, such as images and sounds (Fahlenbrach, 2008, p. 88). In film narratives foregrounding blindness, the audience is conditioned to understand the metaphor of darkness on an emotional and semantic level. Another significant feature of darkness is its de-spatialisation through a lack of depth cues; the temporal dimension of the image is stripped of any visual and spatial events and it becomes 'empty' time, reminiscent of time spent in incarceration. It is an extreme form of disembodiment, with a total loss of Merleau-Ponty's spatial anchoring.

Of course, it could be argued that the aesthetic function of the darkness motif (or any other distortion of the naturalistic image) is to ideologically attack the very notion of ocular-centrism. Hence, this type of film form serves as a 'counter metaphor' that cripples the spectator's visual sense and triggers other, non-visual senses. I do not share this interpretation, however. It is doubtful that a public audience would interpret this counter-ideology as such, especially if it is simultaneously immersed in folk-psychological narratives that focus on character and emotions. On an affective level, the expressive visual imagery shown in the pictures above may be seen to be scopophilic at best, voyeuristic at worst, and therefore adhering to ocular-centric practice. Above all, even if a subversion of ocular-centrism could be justified through some theoretical acrobatics, it would be a purely authorial strategy that forwards etic and backgrounds emic experience.

#### **4.2.4 Interpretation of the content analysis**

##### *Visibility*

The current media landscape suggests that the representation of blindness (and disability in general) has increased. For example, when planning the sampling for the content analysis, it was noticeable that the films made after 2000 were much more numerous than those made before this date. With regards to television, Paul Darke (2004, p. 102) suggests that a new emphasis on 'political correctness' has fostered the higher visibility of disability. However, he also notes that this increase has been driven by the pursuit of audience ratings through increasingly sentimental

human stories, which allegedly show positive images of disability but in fact reinforce negative or stereotypical imagery. As Markotić (2008, p. 7) puts it, “disability has been disproportionately underrepresented at the same time as it has been excessively displayed”. This display has become largely devoid of political significance or any critical reflexivity that would expose the social construction of disability (Darke, 2004, p. 102); instead, the focus is on emotional journeys that foreground themes such as identity, trauma, bitterness and the struggle for social acceptance.

These recurrent themes may well represent what is an integral part of blind people’s lives, but this foregrounding of blindness as a *disability* results in superficial, incomplete and one-sided portrayals. Content producers appear unaware of the problem, no doubt because of their apparent lack of interest in critically placing their films in a wider media landscape. In their promotional materials and interviews, they use terms such as ‘promoting visibility’, ‘raising awareness’ or ‘giving a voice to’ in order to deflect accusations of misrepresentation. Riley attacks what he calls the ‘visibility argument’, in these terms:

[T]he [film] industry produces movies that touch millions only to leave them as smugly ignorant as ever, reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypes and ... perpetuating the pity syndrome by seductively re-presenting endless editions of its own static and vacuous, obnoxious, and simplistic versions of people with disabilities that perversely do more damage than the invisibility they purport to combat. (Riley, 2005, p. 76)

For this reason, the filmmakers’ intentions (or whether they themselves are partially blind or disabled, as in the case of *Going Blind*) are irrelevant when it comes to evaluating media’s impact on how blind people are perceived by a public audience on screen and in real life.<sup>43</sup> Also, given the homogeneity and frequency of narrative and aesthetic tropes in documentaries about blindness, these have to be regarded as a body of texts rather than singling out for praise the artistic or social

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<sup>43</sup> Appendix 1 provides a case study highlighting production and representation practices in the UK television industry in relation to disability.

merits of individual films.<sup>44</sup> For example, it could be argued that films like *Notes on Blindness*, although an emotional and sentimental account that adheres to folk-psychological narratives and blindness stereotypes, nonetheless attempts to reflect the key transition in John Hull's life from being sighted to becoming blind – albeit, at the expense of representing other aspects in John's life, rendering it a very limited, schematic account. The accompanying fear of the unknown and the ultimate acceptance of his impairment are poetically described by Hull himself in a voice-over (using original audio tapes), which aligns well, thematically and aesthetically, with the audio-visual poetry deployed by the filmmakers. However, the use of the aforementioned stereotypes, such as limiting the film to the theme of blindness both literally and metaphorically (the disability, for example, is represented in terms of a religious redemption), makes clear that the filmmakers' primary aim was to tell a narratively and visually engaging story; critical reflections about how that might contribute to social attitudes towards blindness appear to be absent. Consequently, the question that is most pertinent to spectatorship dispositions does not concern how blindness or the blind individual are represented in singular examples, but how the recurrent use of particular tropes has ossified a generic negative portrayal of blind people in mass consciousness, affecting the social cognition of blind individuals in both the media and in real life.

### *Binary opposites and ableist hegemony*

Folk-psychological narrative formulas often operate through binary opposites (for example, the 'reversal' or 'turning point') to express dramatic development. However, filmic portrayals of disability, particularly blindness, seem to be even more prone to narrative and aesthetic binary opposites, such as blind/sighted, dark/light, abled/disabled, normal/deviant, tragic/comic, low/high,

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<sup>44</sup> Several of the films in the survey do indeed have good intentions, aiming to raise social awareness of blindness and blind people, offering information on their websites, and enabling online donations. See, for example, the websites of *Across Still Water* (<http://acrossstillwater.com/>), *Blindsight* (<http://www.blindsightthemovie.com>) and *Going Blind* (<http://goingblindmovie.com>). Interestingly, most of the information provided relates to explaining the exact visual impairment of the characters from a medical perspective, which, once again, relegates blindness to the realm of the deviant and pathological.

fearful/courageous and victim/hero.<sup>45</sup> In binary systems, as John Hartley (2002, p. 19) explains, meaning is generated by opposition, and any ambiguity is an offence that is actively suppressed. As an example, he cites how news often structures the world as 'us' versus 'them'; anything indeterminate is taboo. In relation to blindness, one of these taboos is the general lack of portrayals of partial blindness in documentary films. With the exception of *Window of the Soul*, all the films in the survey focus either on completely blind characters or characters who are on a sure path to becoming completely blind. Even in the *The Undateables*, Damien, who is partially sighted, is introduced by the narrator as "virtually blind".

Similarly, especially in terms of aesthetics, blind people are portrayed as deviant, creating a direct antithesis to the abled-bodied norm in society. Disability thus creates a convenient other for the self-affirmation of the able-bodied. Comparing oneself with others is one of the most fundamental and ubiquitous of all human tendencies, helping reinforce a feeling of identity (Guimond, 2006, p. 33). With blindness in film, this social comparison is performed by the filmmaker and projected onto the spectator. This 'ableist' ideology operates through medical and psychological regimes that emphasise the loss or lack of a particular ability and reinforce the dichotomies, mentioned above, that separate 'us' from 'them' (Markotić, 2008, p. 7). Riley (2005, p. 9) accuses the media of being complicit in ascribing these binary roles through compressing difference into particular symbols and categories, which reinforce stereotypes that amplify the normality of an ableist domination over the disabled community.

### *Stereotypes*

Stereotypes embedded in and perceived through film narratives, and stereotypes in the social cognition of real life give rise to and reinforce each other, and make use of the same cognitive faculties in our brains (see Chapters Two and Three). Dyer (2006, p. 355) explains that *stereotypes* are attached to those who are excluded by the normative rules of society, while *social types* are attached to those that

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<sup>45</sup> Barasch (2001) identifies additional binary opposites in art and fiction narratives, such as knowledge/ignorance and good/evil.

normative rules are designed for. The binary of stereotypes/social types creates and maintains a boundary against the 'excluded', one that needs to be clearly delineated by keeping stereotypes "fixed, clear-cut and unalterable", while the 'included', the social types, are "open-ended, more provisional, more flexible, to create the sense of freedom, choice, self-definition for those within the boundaries of normalcy" (p. 355). The rigidity and perseverance of stereotypes is particularly evident in the tragic and 'supercrip' narrative schema. Barasch (2001, p. 147) illustrates how these two stereotypes have been consistently used in art and literature throughout history: the blind person as an unfortunate who has been deprived of humanity's most precious gift, and the blind person as possessing a mysterious link with a supernatural reality. Thus, stereotypes that are based on simplistic folk-psychological schemas automatically transcend medium specificity. As Henry Bacon (2011, p. 42) points out, stock characters "exist in a ready-made form in a shared cultural sphere"; their few but significant character traits, embodied in a certain text, enable the audience to immediately recognise the character type and explain certain types of behaviour.

Whereas dissemination, frequency and consistency are major aspects of stereotype formation, Alexis Tan *et al.* (2010) also identify 'valence', 'realism' and 'believability'. Valence is the receiver's evaluation of an event they have witnessed or participated in as positive or negative (p. 572), while realism and believability refer to how true to life and believable the information is (p. 578). If perceived as real and believable, positive media portrayals lead to positive stereotyping and negative ones to negative stereotypes.

With regard to blindness, the content analysis in this research has shown that ableist dichotomies in general attach a negative valence to the disabled person (bitter, fearful, disabled, socially shunned, for example). In other words, it is very unlikely the audience would aspire to be blind. They may be inspired by the narrative depictions of perseverance or strength, but not by the actual disability, the primary narrative identifier for blind characters. In terms of realism, as discussed in Chapter Three, documentaries – as opposed to fiction – are perceived to be true to life, unless the audience has reason to believe otherwise. Thus, a

public audience is likely to perceive blind people in the way they are constructed by the documentary narrative, without testing the authenticity of the portrayal through further research. In terms of believability, the sources of the film survey vary considerably. For instance, Channel 4's more entertaining *The Undateables* may be regarded with more distrust than Joseph Lovett's more factual *Going Blind*, especially since Lovett himself appears in the film as both the main visually impaired screen character and the filmmaker. However, as Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, p. 85) argue, we are prone to remember the information itself rather than the source – due to “impaired source memory” we may read a story in a dubious magazine but several months later we may have forgotten the source yet still remember the information, which makes us more inclined to believe the story.

While the valence of the blind screen character is negative, uplifting narrative journeys and especially their positive conclusions have a positive valence. However, this positive valence, which relates to the spectator's mood and emotions by the end of the film, may have an adverse effect on critical reflection. Bodenhausen *et al.* (1994) point out that positive moods and emotions (as opposed to neutral or negative emotions) can result in a higher probability of applying stereotypes to other social groups. People who are generally content, such as the viewer who has just experienced an inspiring and uplifting narrative that does not leave any room for ambiguity about the outcome, are less likely to recognise individual differences within a stereotyped group, relying more on generic and totalising schematic knowledge.

All in all, while all the films scrutinised here aim to use narrative and aesthetic strategies to mediate emic experience, they actually achieve the opposite by using recurrent, fixed and universalist stereotypes that may engage the spectator emotionally in a dramatic plot but distance him/her from the individual screen character. The blind character is mystified, exoticised, objectified and patronised, and inevitably becomes the other.

However, according to Gordon Moskowitz (2005, pp. 481–482), stereotype-inconsistent information can undermine non-critical confidence in schematic knowledge and potentially lead to the reconfiguration of stereotypes. Inconsistency

does not have to be counter-stereotypic but can simply be inconsistent with the expectations of the perceiver. In other words, in order to undo established blindness stereotypes, a documentary does not have to openly subvert or expose them; it may suffice to offer alternative portrayals that are not binary opposites of stereotypical portrayals but merely a portrayal inconsistent with previous ones, due to the introduction of an element of ambiguity, for example. Because of the prevalent othering of blind people through coherent, fixed and universal stereotypes, it can be assumed that the spectators' dispositions in relation to blindness are fairly homogenous. Hence, attempting to bypass these stereotypes by offering alternatives based on 'informed' emic experience should result in a homogenous audience response, especially in light of post-filmically targeting the audience through the mediation of embodied experiences rather than hermeneutic assumptions (see Chapter Three).

### **4.3 Alternative representations**

#### **4.3.1 The 'everyday'**

Although Seung-Jun Yi's *Planet of Snail* (2011) occasionally uses aesthetic stereotypes, it is very different to the other films surveyed here in terms of narrative structure and overall use of style. It depicts the ordinary, everyday life of Young-Chan, a young, deaf-blind man, and his wife, Soon-Ho, who has dwarfism. The film focuses on their intimate connection and haptic communication (figure 18), interspersed with poetic voice-overs from the main character who reflects on his existence, and it indicates that Young-Chan's poetry, which he writes and recites, is one of his day-to-day activities, and has not been created solely for the purposes of the film.



**Figure 18: Planet of Snail (2011) – connection and communication**

The key strategy the film employs to bypass stereotypes is a focus on the everyday.<sup>46</sup> Instead of an intricate folk-psychological narrative formula, the plot structure consists of a bricolage of mostly unconnected fragments of everyday life, revolving around particular moments (such as changing a light bulb or washing the dishes) in which the character's personalities emerge through their interactions with each other and with their physical space. This episodic plot structure deflects any character trajectories and role schemas, and highlights the ordinariness of their everyday lives. Their disability is neither rendered as spectacle, nor is it normalised. We see ordinary people, performing ordinary activities, albeit with *extraordinary* bodies.

It is rare to see blind characters undertaking everyday tasks in films, such as housework or shopping (Badia Corbella and Sánchez-Guijo Acevedo, 2010, p. 76). The general lack of the ordinary and the mundane is summed up by blind therapist Tasha Chemel (n.d.), who argues that “instead of focusing on the ordinary, society chooses the extraordinary in blind people, imposing upon them a need to overcome, to inspire and stand as shining examples of the extraordinary power of the human spirit”. This focus on the extraordinary demonstrates the ableist

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<sup>46</sup> As Highmore (2011, p. 2) establishes that the terms ‘everyday’ and ‘ordinary/ordinariness’ can be taken to be synonymous, this thesis follows suit and uses these terms interchangeably, though at times, contextually. For example, ‘everyday’ may be more appropriate in contexts that relate to time and ‘ordinary’ in contexts that refer to space and objects.

formation of stereotypes that emphasise deviance from what is deemed 'normal' or 'ordinary' (Dyer's 'social types').

The everyday of screen characters is often perceived to be inherent to documentary. John Ellis (2007, p. 59) believes that "documentary revels in the ordinary, the unconsidered detail or the mundane [and] a love for the contingent, that which just chanced to happen". Unfortunately, this is a common misconception, especially if the schematic narrative formulas propagated by textbooks and identified in the films surveyed here is taken into consideration. These formulas emphasise the extraordinary, the heroic and the tragic, and actually defy the contingent by imposing predictable plot journeys; chance occurrences are banished if they are deemed to undermine the coherence of the plot. Even if Ellis is merely referring to the gathering of filmic material in the everyday lives of the characters at the pre-filmic level, this everydayness is sacrificed on a post-filmic level during post-production for immersive, folk-psychological narratives that eliminate the ordinary.

The filmmakers of most of the films surveyed may simply assume that pre-filmic ordinariness is automatically mediated into the post-filmic, and the deployment of narrative formulas is merely a strategy aimed at engaging the audience while mediating emic, everyday experience. This assumption is also reflected in Ellis's (and many other documentary scholars') failure to distinguish between the pre-filmic and post-filmic context in his statement, thus highlighting the importance of the two-level mediation model presented in Chapter Three. The mediation of the characters' everyday requires particular attention on the pre-filmic and the post-filmic level, as the following two chapters demonstrate. First, however, the notion of the 'everyday' needs further elaboration.

For phenomenologists, the everyday constitutes the 'life-world' – the "world we ordinarily take for granted, the pre-scientific, experientially given world that we are familiar with and never call into question" (Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009, p. 97). Consequently, ordinary activities can reveal insights into the normal texture of characters' individual and social life, creating an embodied, momentary experience for the spectator; that is, a mediated emic experience. The mediation of everyday,

emic experience can result in deconstructing or ‘un-othering’ the otherness of the previously stereotyped blind person. For example, the light bulb changing sequence in *Planet of Snail* (figure 19) embodies the characters’ synergy as a couple through the accomplishment of an ordinary task, which is only made possible by conjoining complementary skills and abilities – Young-Chan is able to reach the lamp and Soon-Ho is able to direct him. Although both characters’ disabilities are evident, the ordinariness of the scene and the affective chemistry between them form the emic experience of this moment. In addition, since this scene is not embedded in a larger plot journey that focuses on their impairment, his deaf-blindness and her dwarfism appear as ordinary (in the context of their world), which is the case in almost every other scene in the film.



**Figure 19: *Planet of Snail* (2011) – changing a light bulb**

The strength of this film lies not merely on its focus on individual everyday events, but on the everyday as an entire narrative experience, without overlaying a heroic or tragic plot journey that would counteract the sense of the quotidian and ordinary. This ensures that the characters remain multi-layered and nuanced, instead of slipping into simplistic, schematic roles. This is a crucial observation if *Planet of Snail* to compared with Sergey Dvortsevov’s *In the Dark* (2004), which tells the story of an elderly retired blind man and his only companion, a white cat (figure 20). He spends most of his time at home, making string bags that he offers to passers-by on the street. He patiently spends hours disentangling the yarn, while his

cat keeps stealing, hiding and unravelling the wool. Every scene focuses on the material, everyday moment, and the observational, unstyled aesthetics mediate to the spectator a strong spatial and temporal sense of this man's emic experience.



Figure 20: *In the Dark* (2004)

Nevertheless, these ordinary moments are embedded in a clear three-act plot structure depicting the futility of the activity. The first act shows the character elaborately making the bags; in the second, he tries to sell them on the street without success; and in the third act, he weeps as he stores away the tools and materials used in the first act. The narrative is based on the established tragic trajectory discussed earlier, although here the reason is not because the character is becoming blind, but because he is trying to cope with apparent loneliness, which, by implication, is the result of his disability and age. A negative valence of bitterness, loneliness and pity infuses the film; the correlation of negative stereotypes of age and disability reinforces the role schema of the tragic figure that has become a fossilised part of the audience's schematic array of tools of interpretation. It is unfortunate that, as opposed to *Planet of Snail*, the filmmaker has omitted any other everyday activities, such as cooking or shopping, and focused instead on three ordinary activities that have a clear function within the given plot structure and inadvertently contribute to yet another othering portrayal of blindness. Still, the film resists the usual stereotypical structure of an uplifting mood and does not conclude on a positive note. While the character remains ultimately

tragic, the overall mood conveyed to the audience is ambiguous, oscillating between comedy and tragedy, especially when the cat steals the wool. The tragic, low-key ending as he stores away the materials in a resigned manner avoids the last-minute injection of some physical or transcendental optimism, thus appearing less extraordinary than the films discussed further above.

In conclusion, the aim of my documentaries about Terry and June is not only to capture everyday events, but to actually mediate the *general* everydayness of the two characters to the audience both on a scene-by-scene level and on a narrative one. Disability scholars (for example, Schillmeier, 2007; Zhang and Haller, 2013) have suggested portraying disability through the ordinary as a possible corrective to othering stereotypes. For a filmmaker trained to adhere to folk-psychological narratives that highlight extraordinariness as a means of reaching a wide audience, it may be disconcerting to abandon a tried-and-tested strategy. After all, the lack of a clear plot structure and clear character roles induces a fear of randomness and chaos in producers, directors and especially editors, who wrongly assume that lack of structure equals lack of character, and thus lack of audience engagement. However, as Clifford Geertz reminds us:

Looking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms brings out not ... the arbitrariness of human behaviour but the degree to which its meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed. (Geertz, 1973, p. 14)

Like Geertz, Bondebjerg (2014, pp.3–4) believes that mediating the everyday reduces otherness, especially in documentary film, which portrays reality with greater authenticity than fiction and therefore helps form our understanding of global narratives and cosmopolitan imaginaries. Bondebjerg explains that documentaries have the capacity to bring us close to the everyday realities of “distant and strange others”, creating “identification and empathy by showing us that people who may seem to be very different from us have universal, human dimensions, despite cultural or other differences” (p. 4). However, it could be argued that universal human stories are an intrinsic attribute of folk-psychological

narratives that aim to elicit an emotional audience experience through global event and role schemas. But the universality of the *everyday* should not be confused with the universality of *characters*: your ‘everyday’ may be very different to my ‘everyday’, but I can experience it as *your* ‘everyday’, nonetheless. This is where the difference between otherness and alterity becomes a crucial distinction.

### 4.3.2 Alterity

Geertz (1973, p. 14) argues that “understanding a people’s culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity”. This is the main paradigm of my emic approach, which aims to mediate the “particular ordinariness” of the subject without resorting to universal descriptions. As Markotić (2012) puts it when describing the everyday ablution scenes of the main quadriplegic character in Joe Moulins’ *Citizen Sam* (2006),<sup>47</sup> the audience sees the actions of a “‘regular’ guy, performing ‘regular’ activities albeit with an ‘irregular’ body”. In contrast to stereotypical representations, the ordinariness of the activity preserves what Kate Nash (2011, p. 232) calls, with reference to Levinas, the ‘alterity’ of the other, while preventing actual otherness.

‘Otherness’ in this thesis is understood in a hegemonic context in which the other is socially stereotyped and thus universalised, whereas ‘alterity’ denotes the phenomenological other – anyone we face, other than ourselves, who must remain particularised. Sarah Cooper (cited in Nash, 2011, pp. 232–233) argues that documentary films have privileged universal arguments or generalisations over individual difference or particularity in a “tendency to situate the particular in terms of broader social and political issues”, and this actually limits audiences’ knowledge. Renov (2004, p. 148) also argues that documentary has tended to turn ‘subjects’ into ‘objects of knowledge’ through an “acquisitive, totalizing quest for knowledge”. This universalisation through the use of othering stereotypes may not be intended (Riley, 2005; Rimmerman, 2013) but it is still a latent form of domination and a

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<sup>47</sup> In a similar way to *In the Dark*, *Citizen Sam* portrays a variety of everyday domestic activities; yet, they are part of a stereotypical ‘supercrip’ plot structure, in which the main character successfully campaigns, against all the odds, to become mayor of Vancouver.

direct result of folk-psychological narrative formulas that seek to reveal characters' motivations and emotions through the pursuit of a particular narrative goal. Universal human narratives are prone to stereotyping certain social and cultural groups, due to the use of the binary of social types and stereotypes that generates their universality. Particularising a character through emphasising their alterity is therefore a further prerequisite for undoing stereotypes

According to Nash (2011, p. 234), the acknowledgment of alterity is only possible if a documentary focuses on the complex and particular, while simultaneously allowing contradiction and admitting the limits of its knowledge. As she puts it, "where the fact of close observation prevents the spectator from adopting an all-seeing position, where the images speak of doubt, uncertainty, and plurality of meaning, the alterity of the other can persist" (pp. 237-238). A focus on emic everyday experience is not enough to reduce otherness and emphasise alterity. This is particularly true of *In the Dark*, where everyday events are woven into a plot structure that leaves little room for uncertainty or doubt in terms of character motivation: the man makes bags in order to keep himself occupied and overcome the apparent rigidity and emptiness of his life. *Planet of Snail*, on the other hand, presents a variety of often disconnected everyday scenes, some more ordinary than others, and some exposing the disability more than others. This leaves open ends, creates ambiguity concerning how much Soon-Ho considers Young-Chan a burden, and even casts some doubt as to whether the main characters are performing their loving relationship for the camera.

According to Kathleen Stewart (2007, pp. 2–5), the ordinary is a good vehicle for alterity, as it is inherently plural and ambiguous, an assemblage of disparate scenes that escape definition, rationalisation, classification or even symbolic signification. Ben Highmore (2011, p. 1) describes the everyday as the "accumulation of 'small things' that constitute a more expansive but hard to register 'big thing'". The everyday is vague and ambiguous, as it is "as much characterised by confusion as clarity, as much by simultaneity and complexity as discrete and separable motifs" (p. 2). Ambiguity, as already mentioned, represents an offence to binary opposites, since it cannot be categorised into one or the other

binary (Hartley, 2002, p. 19); it can simultaneously belong to both or to neither, or it can oscillate between them. A concrete example in *Planet of Snail* is the main character's experience of being deaf-blind. At times, he accepts his disability with humour, at other times he bitterly laments its restrictions, and yet at another time he highlights its extraordinariness by comparing himself to an astronaut. This ambivalence potentially transcends the positive or negative valences of ossified role schemas, and of disability itself.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The content analysis in this chapter has demonstrated the persistence of fixed stereotypes that Walter Lippmann and Homi Bhabha describe in Chapter One. It has shown that the stark difference between non-blind and blind people is predominantly responsible for a plethora of othering stereotypes that maintain a firm boundary between these two communities. These othering stereotypes are maintained and perpetuated through an interaction of social schemas and narrative schemas. Whilst the social schemas non-blind people hold about blind people can be deemed hegemonic at their core, the narrative schemas that appear in documentary making textbooks and, correspondingly, in the discussed films, are not inherently hegemonic. Applying these folk-psychological narrative schemas to non-blind characters or topics unrelated to disability, may well yield non-hegemonic results. It is, however, the particular configuration of social and narrative stereotypes identified in this chapter that contributes to the continuous othering of blindness.

But, it needs to be conceded that this othering process has by now become an autonomous global phenomenon, for which no individual filmmaker or film can be condemned. In terms of the filmmakers, this chapter has highlighted the positive intentions of most directors of the films analysed to contribute to the well-being and social inclusion of blind people. For instance, *Notes on Blindness* has been distributed with three different audio description tracks, catering for a variety of

preferences and abilities within the blind community to experience the film.<sup>48</sup> As part of their outreach programme, the filmmakers have even produced an immersive virtual reality project based on John Hull's sensory and psychological experience of blindness.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of the actual films, especially *Black Sun*, *In the Dark* and *Notes on Blindness* have distinct merit in that they provide the spectator with a riveting narrative and aesthetic experience that pushes the boundaries of filmic storytelling. Although *Black Sun's* and *Notes on Blindness's* attempts to mediate emic experience are highly problematic, they nonetheless excel in establishing an immersive appropriation to the sensorial and psychological experiences of the characters in relation to their disability. In contrast, *In the Dark* dispenses with aesthetic experimentation in favour of observing minute domestic and everyday actions linked to the process and outcome of bag-making, which brings the audience emotionally close to the character's persona. All three films succeed at experientially involving the audience through concentrating on a particular and iconic facet of their characters' lives. It is, however, exactly this concentration that becomes precarious for the representation of blindness. From this perspective, one would wish that these films' characters were not blind, but then their well-crafted narrative unity, which coheres the disability with the story's themes and the spectatorial experience, would indubitably perish.

Although, from a filmmaking perspective, the objective is usually to create such narrative coherence and concentrated audience engagement, the alternative strategy I propose is a collage of related and unrelated emic everyday experiences that mediate the alterity of blind characters without having to focus on the disability or constructing extraordinary characters and plot journeys. The disability itself is neither foregrounded nor relegated to the background, it is simply *there* as part of the characters' everyday life. The table below (table 2) summarises the insights gained in this chapter and serves as a general guideline for the following two chapters.

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<sup>48</sup> See <http://www.notesonblindness.co.uk/accessibility/>

<sup>49</sup> See <http://www.notesonblindness.co.uk/vr/>

The Other	The Alter
primarily portrayed as extraordinary	primarily portrayed as ordinary
etic experience	emic experience
object of (our) knowledge	subject of (their) experience
collective difference: <i>us – them</i>	individual difference: <i>me – him/her</i>
universality	particularity
certainty / binary opposites	ambiguity
clear narrative journey	narrative episodes
plot-driven	character/moment-focused
aesthetics simulate sensory perception	aesthetics mediate embodied experience
audio-visual poetry	corporeal schemas and spatial anchoring

Table 2: The Other vs. the Alter

For Highmore (2011, p. 42), the everyday is a form of living out experience through expressive actions. This “aesthetics of the everyday” is a relational zone where experience and expression mediate through spatiality and temporality. While the previous chapter emphasised the importance of embodied experience, materiality and temporality for pre-filmically mapping and post-filmically capturing emic experience, this chapter has provided the particular critical framing necessary to approach emic experience in relation to the everyday experience and alterity of blind characters, using *Planet of Snail* as a case study for mediating ordinariness.

However, whereas *Planet of Snail* is an observational documentary (Nash applies her theory of alterity to observational documentaries only), the everyday is not limited to the pro-filmic present but can include the ‘past everyday’, or even the ordinariness of the filmmaking process (if that process significantly shapes the characters’ everyday experience). The concept of the everyday is complex and slippery. Consequently, instead of searching for a definition, it is more useful to explore its “grammar, its patterns of association, its form of connection and disconnection” (Highmore, 2011, p. 2), a task the following two chapters undertake by means of concrete pre-filmic and post-filmic examples. This pragmatic approach

is in tune with the cognitive approach to 'documentary' (see Chapter Two), and the phenomenological approach to 'experience', both of which abstain from offering theoretical definitions, focusing instead on empirical descriptions of structures and mechanisms in relation to human experience.

Unlike the top-down approach of folk-psychological narratives, in which themes, role schemas and event schemas dominate post-filmic decisions about cinematography, editing and narrative structuring, my approach is a bottom-up one, whereby themes and character portraits organically emerge from a range of everyday encounters. This is aligned with the aim of using embodied experience as a broadly consistent foundation for spectatorship. Thus, Chapter Five presents methods for mediating emic everyday experience through ordinary *materialities*, such as body, space and objects. The ordinary is mediated in the present moment through pre-filmic and post-filmic methods that focus on aesthetics – the raw material of the narrative. Chapter Six, on the other hand, discusses how these raw materials come together in order to mediate emic everyday experience through ordinary *temporalities* on a narrative level. Here, the ordinary is mediated through the temporal continuum of the audience watching the film from beginning to end.

## Chapter Five: Ordinary Materialities

### 5.1 Introduction

In order to achieve the mediation of everyday emic<sup>50</sup> experience, the following chapter focuses on ordinary materialities. Schillmeier (2010, pp. 122–123) advocates that the disability researcher concentrate on ordinary material practices, since these affirm their complex, multi-layered experiences, and shifts the perception of disability from a given individual or social fact to an outcome of historically specific, embodied human and non-human configurations. The concept of materiality is a good starting point for ordinary experience. According to Christopher Tilley *et al.* (2006, p. 3), “[m]ateriality refers to the fleshy, corporeal and physical, as opposed to spiritual, ideal and value-laden aspects of human existence”. As such, materiality can include anything from tools, decorative objects, buildings, rooms and food to plants, animals and human bodies.

Materiality inherently mediates. Firstly, it mediates between the elusive concept of ‘self’ or ‘identity’ and the world around us; it is only through material engagement that individuals have the opportunity to articulate aspects of identity on a personal, cultural and emotional level (Woodward, 2007, p. 135). Secondly, materiality mediates information, emotions, ideas and impressions between people (Dant, 1999, p. 153), and this intersubjective exchange can either occur synchronically or diachronically, and can take place in the same space or across spaces. Our corporeal interaction with objects anchors our memories, expresses our affects, upholds relationships, conveys meanings and provokes new ideas.

Jennifer Barker’s (2009, p. 20) interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the ‘chiasm’<sup>51</sup> considers materiality to be a primordial state in which we, and all objects, are immersed in a relation of reversibility – what we touch simultaneously touches us. Building on Hegel’s and Marx’s dialectical theories, scholars of material

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<sup>50</sup> Henceforth, the term ‘emic’ will be largely omitted as the previous two chapters have established that, in relation to my documentaries, mediated experience has to be inherently emic in order to avoid stereotypical portrayals of blind people.

<sup>51</sup> See Merleau-Ponty (1968, pp. 130–155)

culture have described the concept of 'objectification' as the dialectical relationship between things and people. For instance, Highmore (2011, p. 58) explains that things "affect us, entice us, accompany us, extend us, [and] assist us", while we "make them, break them, adjust them, accredit them with meaning, join them together, [and] discard them". Tilley (2006, p. 61), meanwhile, explains that subjects and objects "form part of each other while not collapsing into or being subsumed into the other ... the ontological relationship between the two embodies this contradiction or ambiguity: same and different, constituted and constituting".

This ambiguity is a good accompanying paradigm for the mediation of alterity and avoidance of stereotypical binaries. As Daniel Miller (2010, pp. 54–56) asserts, objectification overcomes dualisms such as animate/inanimate, subject/object and active/passive. It can even transcend valence-based binaries. However, objects themselves are inherently ambiguous; for example, Miller explains that commodities are not good or bad in themselves, but their potential effect on the consumer entails both the risk of oppression and the promise of autonomy (pp. 62-63). Another ambiguity inherent to objects is their simultaneous representation of generality and particularity (Brown, 2001; Highmore, 2011). Their generality means they are part of a larger whole, such as the totality of objects in a domestic space, the sum of a toolset or collection, the material exchange of a consumerist society, or the output of production practices; their particularity consists in their ability to elicit, for example, a sense of familiarity, sentimentality, nostalgia, possessiveness or aesthetic appreciation.

Thus, objects feature throughout both my films, which mediate what Jean Baudrillard (2005, p. 92) terms a 'private totality'. For Baudrillard, a subject constructs and maintains his/her own world through a collection of possessed things. These are everyday objects in which we invest feelings and emotions, abstracting them from their mere utilitarian function and bringing them into a personal relationship with us. However, while Baudrillard draws a binary division between possessed and utilised objects, the case studies in this chapter demonstrate that particular everyday objects can be both, and this ambivalence provides fertile ground for mediating objectification through embodied experience.

Lastly, objects have to be treated in relation to embodied experience. As Chapter Three argues, embodied experiences are primarily corporeal phenomena that do not evoke an indexical relationship to the real world, and they may or may not yield symbolic meanings and elicit audience interpretation. If objects are to be mediated as ‘objectified’ embodiments of their characters, the filmic focus needs to be on the material presence of the moment, as Kracauer (1960) suggests (see Chapter Three), instead of interpellating them into folk-psychological narrative roles that illustrate motivation and emotion in relation to a plot trajectory.

The following case studies are based on material encounters triggered by particular objects. Pre-filmic and post-filmic methods are signposted; the former is based for the most part on anthropological-phenomenological models and the latter is mainly framed by cognitive models. As this thesis pursues a spectatorship-focused (not filmmaker-focused) approach, the pre-filmic methods do not reflexively discuss my authorial creative process but focus instead on the production of phenomenological data through mapping the character’s everyday experience, which is then ‘naturalised’ on the post-filmic level through their mediation to the audience.

## **5.2 The evocative object**

### **5.2.1 Pre-filmic methods**

In her anthology, *Evocative Objects* (2011), Sherry Turkle asks thirty-four people to choose an object and write about its associations, explaining that this will bring to the fore hidden layers that go beyond its utility. Turkle’s experiment reveals the nature of the possessed and subjectively experienced object through a bricolage of ideas, emotions, descriptions, gestures, intonations and expressions. In the same way, I asked Terry and June to each choose an object and talk about it in front of the camera as they were holding it. I did not give them any directions as to what to

say or how to handle the objects. Terry chose an old paintbrush,<sup>52</sup> while June chose a small piece of marble<sup>53</sup> (figures 21-22).



Figure 21: Scene: 'The Brush'



Figure 22: Scene: 'The Marble Stone'

*Two modes of material being*

The cultural value of objects lies in the narratives and performances they draw from their possessors. In turn, the “effective performance of any identity relies on engagements with, and presentations of, objects” (Woodward, 2007, p. 151). The character’s performances in this case, however, are a direct result of the encounter between us: the performances are clearly elicited by my intervention and the presence of the camera, and the actual *grammar* of these performances is mappable through Miles Richardson’s (1982) ‘two modes of being’ in relation to materiality. In one mode, when absorbed in responding to others and unconsciously focusing on the task at hand, we experience the world around us as a given fact; in the other, when we are detached from the task at hand and conscious of our

<sup>52</sup> Scene: ‘The Brush’ – 26:30 (henceforth, this 4-digit number identifies the timecode in the accompanying QuickTime files in minutes:seconds)

<sup>53</sup> Scene: ‘The Marble Stone’ – 32:29

responses to others, we experience the world as a construct (p. 421). Richardson points out that our “ability to shift modes of being poses critical questions about the relationship between our existence and the material world in which we exist”, since materiality is constitutive for our being-in-the-world (pp. 421-422).

Given that Terry and June are asked to perform an unusual action with an ordinary object, their initial state is one of self-conscious awareness of the situation. The constructed nature of this encounter prompts each of them to consciously highlight the attributes and functions of the brush (painting) and the stone (doorstop), which engenders a shift into reflexive consciousness for the first time. For example, Terry notices that the brush’s head is loose and can be detached, and he discovers a physical hazard when he puts the brush behind his ear and almost pokes himself in the eye (see below). On the other hand, when June recounts her family tradition of passing the stone from generation to generation, she becomes aware that it will probably be passed on to her daughter after she dies. However, several times, both characters slip into an implicit, automated mode of being as they become absorbed in the situation, and instead of recounting, they either re-enact or reflect. For instance, Terry re-enacts different painting manoeuvres, revealing the variety of corporeal schemas he uses when painting (figure 23). June, whose body language is more reserved than Terry’s, wonders to herself whether the stone came from a bombed church on the road outside her grandparents’ house.



**Figure 23: Painting manoeuvres**

The ambiguity caused by the co-existence of both modes is perhaps most palpable when they touch and feel the objects, Terry scratching through layers of paint, and June feeling the dents she caused when she kicked the stone as a child (figure 24). This elicits further reactions and reflections, embodying the concept of objectification – they touch the objects and the objects touch them. They are immersed in this situation, yet they also self-consciously perform. Commenting on and experiencing the objects’ haptic features while describing (and, in Terry’s case, enacting) their utilitarian character embodies Tim Dant’s (1999, pp. 169–161) theory that ordinary objects can have a practical function, yet can also result in an aesthetic and pleasurable experience in terms of their physical form. The fact of being blind may even reinforce the evocative haptic nature of the objects.

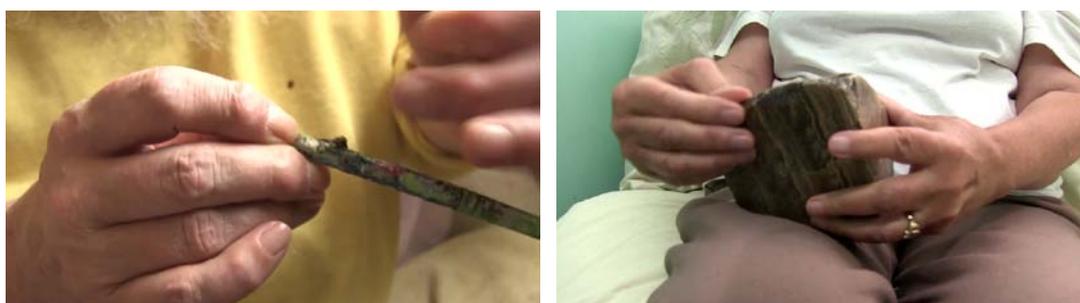


Figure 24: Touching the objects

### *The biographical object*

Interestingly, both of the chosen objects are biographical and evoke a variety of memories in the characters. According to Violette Morin (1969, pp. 135–138), a biographical object mediates for its subject on three levels: (1) on the temporal level, the object becomes old and worn; (2) on the spatial level, it anchors the owner to a particular space and time; and (3) on the level of the owner/consumer, the object helps form the user’s identity and everyday experience as part of a “narrative process of self-definition” (Hoskins, 1998, p. 8).

On the first level, the brush and the stone are both battered, chipped and dented; they reflect the age of the characters and the different layers of their history – a fact Terry comments on when he scratches through the layers of paint

that have incrementally covered the brush's handle over the years, as does June, who recounts anecdotes relating to the stone's dents and misshapen aspect. Morin's second level is revealed through the way Terry's brush anchors him, spatially, to the very spot where he paints (his bedroom/studio). This is reinforced when he selects the brush from the other painting tools next to him, and when he is seen painting in the same space in other scenes. June's spatial anchoring reveals that she first removes the stone from a storage space before presenting it, in a different room, as a former doorstep. Unlike Terry's brush, the utilitarian role and spatial connection of the stone is more transient: it is no longer a doorstep, but a stored item.

Both scenes also reveal the existence of Morin's third level concerning the narrative process of self-definition. Terry talks about the history of the brush in connection with his own history; for example, he recalls where and when he bought it, mentioning that this was in his 'seeing days' and admitting to not remembering what it is made of, although he thinks it is probably squirrel hair. Then he continues to talk about how he uses the brush during the painting process, and what it means to him in the present; he even anthropomorphises the brush by twice referring to it as a 'mate' and commenting that it is "a bit wobbly, but aren't we all?", implying the agency and identity of the brush in relation to himself. In a similarly chronological, yet emotionally more detached fashion, June recounts personal anecdotes in relation to the stone from over three generations – for example, how it served as doorstep for the toilet in her parents' house in order to allow her elderly father to enter the room with his walking frame rather than struggle to negotiate the door. On all three of Morin's levels, the everyday is mediated through a mix of anecdotes of the past and present, ranging from ordinary usage to familial memories.

## 5.2.2 Post-filmic methods

### *Character engagement*

Murray Smith's (1994, p. 35) cognitive model establishes three levels of character engagement: recognition, alignment and allegiance. The first two levels are directly relevant to this research.<sup>54</sup> 'Recognition' depends on a visual representation of the face and body (p. 36), providing the spectator with continuous, recognisable representations of the character. For this reason, the films needed a variety of close-ups showing Terry's and June's faces and hands. However, in order to prevent spatial fragmentation and abstraction (see the previous chapter), and maintain recognition, shots of the overall body, including the face, were more significant. Plantinga (2013, p. 101) suggests that mirror neurons enable the spectator to comprehend faces and bodies in action, thus allowing us to "understand and respond affectively to human events and behaviour".

'Alignment' describes the spectator's access to the character's actions, knowledge and feelings (Smith, 1994, p. 41). Smith distinguishes between alignment through 'spatial attachment' and 'subjective access', the former granting access to the character's physical space, and the latter access to the character's psychological disposition. In terms of spatial attachment, the main cinematographic strategy I employed was filming Terry and June in medium shots which emphasise as much as possible of their upper bodies (Terry was kneeling and June sitting, so the lower body was of little interest) to allow recognition, but also show enough of the surrounding environment to anchor the subject in space, thus aligning the audience with their current location. In addition, the medium shots emphasise 'peripersonal space', which is essential to aligning the audience with the character's interaction with the objects. Peripersonal space refers to the space surrounding our bodies, in which objects can be grasped and manipulated, and which is therefore the "theatre of our interactions with objects" (Brozzoli *et al.*, 2012, p. 449). The brain processes objects in our peripersonal space more thoroughly and involves more modalities of sensory information than it does with objects located in our extrapersonal space,

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<sup>54</sup> Smith's 'allegiance' relates to moral evaluation and social interpretation, and is thus not relevant to the bottom-up approach to spectatorship employed here (see Chapter Three).

which is the space beyond peripersonal space. In other words, our senses (for example, vision, audition, olfaction, touch, proprioception) are more stimulated by objects within our peripersonal space. Furthermore, peripersonal space is mapped by the brain's motor programs that enable us to interact with objects within that space (Gallese and Guerra, 2012, p. 186).

As part of a pre-filmic strategy, Terry and June were asked to position themselves in peripersonal proximity to the objects (that is, to hold them), instead of talking about them at a distance. This resulted in both characters not just holding the objects, but also interacting with them, and this material interaction is post-filmically mediated through a medium shot that brings the characters into close proximity to the audience (figure 25), stimulating their senses and motor neurons. A wide shot would emphasise extrapersonal space and reduce the audience's sensory modalities, while close-ups would spatially and temporally separate the object or the subject. There are comparably few close-ups in either scene, and those there are mainly show Terry's and June's hands performing certain actions as they comment on the object, such as when the brush's head comes off. However, these few close-ups are insert shots; that is, they are preceded and succeeded by medium shots.



Figure 25: Medium shots

The medium shots also emphasise objectification. Verbal communication, facial expressions, body language and interaction with the object all happen as part of the same spatio-temporal continuum. Since upper-body gestures are linked to expressing emotions and articulating thoughts (Beattie, 2004, p. 1), a static medium

shot reveals the subjectivity of both characters. Terry's is expressive and playful; his natural gesticulations in combination with the static medium shot display his body and the brush from a plethora of different angles and positions, while June's is more reserved and stiff. The spectator's sense of spatio-temporal attachment is also induced by invisible elliptical editing, which uses continuity cuts to hide any obvious time ellipses and maintain the coherence of the present moment (by using occasional insert shots and continuity of sound, for example). Similarly, there are no cutaways to other spaces or timelines.

In terms of 'subjective access', Terry's bedroom is small and congested, a fact Terry complains about on several occasions. This experience is mediated by forgoing any wider shots that would reveal the entire room, and only using shots where Terry's body (or parts of it) fills the frame. The camera remains in the same static position throughout the scene, giving the perspective that best shows the material clutter surrounding him (figure 25). In this way, the audience's sense of space is restricted and congested, mirroring Terry's experience of his domestic space.

### *Bracketing*

Miller (2010, p. 51) explains that ordinary objects are peripheral and 'blindingly obvious'; that is, we are 'blind' to their presence. Thus, my pre-filmic and post-filmic emphasis on ordinary objects *brackets* them from their everyday life and results in Terry and June slipping back and forth into Richardson's (1982) self-conscious mode of being. Post-filmically, the narrative and aesthetic emphasis on the brush and the stone places the audience in an anamorphic position that highlights their ordinariness by making them temporarily extraordinary – yet another ambivalence, reminiscent of Louis Delluc's concept of 'photogénie'. According to Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell (2003, p. 91), photogénie distinguishes the film shot from the actual object; that is, the process of filming "lends an object a new expressiveness by giving the viewer a fresh perception of it" even though the shot is an iconic representation of the object. The camera framing already isolates (brackets) objects from their environment, and in the tradition of photogénie,

mediates a realm beyond everyday experience. However, I would argue that in my films that realm is not *beyond* the everyday, but is a *mediated* everyday.

The bracketing in both scenes is reinforced by showing Terry and June displacing the objects from their ordinary position at the beginning of each scene and replacing them at the end (figure 26). This strategy also mediates the brush's ambivalence of being both a collective and a particular object, as it is visibly elevated from being one tool among many others to temporarily being an evocative possession. For the stone, this scene-bracketing reveals it as part of a totality of items that do not quite fit in their dedicated storage space, thus mediating its historical change from a (possible) fragment of a bombed church, to a doorstep, to ultimately a sentimental item that has forfeited its utilitarian function and has become a mere possession, casually stored in remote corner.



Figure 26: Displacing and replacing objects

## 5.3 The historical object

### 5.3.1 Pre-filmic methods

#### *Historicity*

June's back garden is home to the last remaining piece of the town's medieval wall (figure 27). Since June moved to Harwich in 2009, the wall has experienced a significant transition in identity, not only in terms its own role in history, but also through June's actions and her resulting perception of it. The historicity of objects exists as a relational phenomenon arising from the interaction between object and human actor (Jalas, 2009, p. 203). In phenomenological thought, 'historicity' is a concept that something or somebody has developed through history, as opposed to the belief that something is natural, essential or universal. Drawing on the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, David Carr (1991, p. 4) argues that as human beings we are intertwined with history, and therefore we are *in* history as we are *in* the world: it serves as the horizon and background for our everyday experience.



Figure 27: The wall

For Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 95), historicity is embodied in the dialectic of the 'habitual body' and the 'body-in-the-moment'. The habitual body is the 'sedimentation' of past experiences, so it is in essence the historical body, whereas the in-the-moment (or actual) body relates to its corporeal existence in the present

(Smyth, 2013, p. 30). Merleau-Ponty refers only to the human body, but his model can be extended to include any material body – such as a wall. Since the in-the-moment body is unique and cannot be repeated (as is experience in general – see Chapter Three), and the historical body adds sediments with every moment, materiality (whether human or not) is in constant flux. This validates the assumption that fixed stereotypes evoke the other by default, since the non-universal and transient ‘alter’ is closer to our inherent historicity as transient beings. As Tobin Siebers (2008, p. 92) puts it in relation to disability, the concept of the human, as well as the human being him/herself, is a work in progress and does not involve fixed definitions.

In the case of June and the wall, there are four levels of historicity operating simultaneously: firstly, the historicity of the wall, which spans several centuries; secondly, the historicity of June in relation to the wall; thirdly, my historicity and that of the filmmaking process which spans the past three years; and fourthly, the historicity of the audience watching the film. Throughout history, the wall has adopted a range of identities that are to a certain extent assimilated into June’s own historicity, which is mediated through the objectification between her and the wall observed on the pre-filmic level. These identities include the wall as the fortification of a medieval town, a literary inspiration, a friend, an object of custodianship, a garden wall, a backdrop and a nuisance. This sedimentation of transient identities also occurs in the scene with the piece of marble, where June recounts how the stone has been part of four different homes and three generations, a fact that is visually reflected by close-ups of the stone, showing June’s hands touching its layered surface.

### *Material proximity*

In relation to Smith’s (1994) spatial and subjective alignment, as well as to the concept of objectification, I deliberately chose to avoid a conventional interview situation, where June would comfortably sit indoors, talking about the wall, illustrated by cutaways of it. Apart from disembodiment of her voice, this would have resulted in a clear geographical distinction between shots of the subject talking in

one space and cutaways of the object in another, which would fail to mediate the notion of objectification. As a consequence, all these encounters with June took place in material proximity to the wall.

With regards to the peripersonal space (mentioned above), this pre-filmic strategy allows her body to naturally mediate the historical dimension of the objectification between June and the wall through the way she moves in relation to it and through her 'idiolect' – the voice that characterises an individual through tones, word-choices and distinctive phraseology (Paget and Roscoe, 2006). Because the idiolect is situated – that is, determined by external (interaction with different people and objects) and internal circumstances (such as mood and well-being) – it anchors the character in a particular space and time. For example, June's idiolect when talking about the wall crumbling sounds concerned, while her idiolect when talking about its rebuilding sounds content. The post-filmic variations of her idiolects that accompany all the wall scenes embody her historicity in relation to the wall. As Edward Branigan (1989, p. 315) suggests, it is in this way that sound is perceived and evaluated within a discourse. The combination of momentary sounds and sounds that are evaluated narratively, especially when occurring in similar situations, means that the spectator must actively search, discriminate and remember variations of sound motifs (p. 317).

### **5.3.2 Post-filmic methods**

#### *Conceptual blending*

The post-filmic aim is to mediate a 'blend' of historical identities in relation to June and the wall. Conceptual blending, according to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2003, p. 57), is a basic cognitive operation that results in new meaning and global insight, as well as being a fundamental feature of everyday life that allows us to manipulate a diffuse range of meanings. It involves the construction of a partial match between two (or more) input mental spaces into a novel blended mental space (p. 58). The partial match constitutes schematic attributes that both inputs share, but it is only when they blend that a new structure develops, which

nonetheless remains connected to the inputs (p. 59). In a sense, the blended space is ambivalent, lying somewhere between the 'sum' of discreet elements and a new conceptual structure.

Conceptual blending is essentially the principle behind Sergei Eisenstein's (1949, pp. 82–83) dialectical montage, in particular his method of 'intellectual montage', in which conflicting elements are juxtaposed in order to create a novel, intellectual synthesis. Eisenstein's 'montage' is an efficient post-filmic method for achieving conceptual blending, but the inputs need not be antithetical to each other, they just have to be different enough yet linked by a common denominator. This makes conceptual blending induced through montage an excellent post-filmic metaphor for objectification, which is based on the relationship between animate and inanimate materialities, the common denominator being 'action' and 'perception'. The input mental spaces for conceptual blending can also be diachronic, which also makes it a good metaphor for historicity.

What follows is an outline of the four scenes that feature the wall, which technically makes it a narrative motif. Motifs will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, but for now it is important to examine different conceptual blending strategies in each scene, the aim of which is to elicit an audience experience of historicity through juxtaposing the transient historical identities of the wall and those of June. By promoting alterity, this strategy prevents fixed meanings for both of these 'characters' and mediates Merleau-Ponty's dialectic of the historical and the in-the-moment body. In addition, given that the wall is a narrative motif, the spectator's own historicity during the viewing process is part of the conceptual blending process.

**Scene 'The Wall 1':**<sup>55</sup> June introduces the wall by picking up pieces of rubble dislodged from the wall and replacing them, all the while talking about its history and materiality, mentioning how it inspired her to start writing and expressing concern about its deterioration as a result of the weather. This is followed by a short segment of June with her first book, *The Wall*, commenting on the cover photo and the stories (figure 28). This scene blends the different historical identities

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<sup>55</sup> 08:24

of the wall by mediating it as the wall of a former medieval town, a literary inspiration, a friend and an object of custodianship. The blending is a result of June's different accounts and idiolects, but it is most prominently embodied in the juxtaposition of June in the garden interacting with the wall with June in the study interacting with the book and talking about its cover. Adding another layer of history to the actuality in her study, she recounts how she asked David, her partner, to photograph only part of the wall for the cover photo. Being blind, she can imagine the wall in its former, complete state, so she wanted the picture to evoke the gestalt of the entire wall in the reader's mind. The coherence of the momentary material experience is maintained by refraining from intercutting between the two locations, keeping them as two discrete yet related episodic encounters within the same scene. This blends not only the several different identities of the wall with those of June, but also reflexively reveals two pre-filmic encounters within the history of the filmmaking process, since the majority of the other scenes are based on single pre-filmic encounters.



Figure 28: Scene: 'The Wall 1'

**Scene 'The Wall 2':**<sup>56</sup> June is sitting in the garden near the wall, enjoying the warm summer's sun (figure 29). She recounts an anecdote about the time she considered displaying the wall to the public as part of the local annual 'Secret Garden' event. In the end, she changed her mind. Again, two historical events blend; the wall's present and its past, which elicited its present, remain as part of June's private space. This blends the wall's identities as an object of custodianship and as a former medieval town wall, which is no longer a fortification but a 'secret'

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<sup>56</sup> 19:57

attraction. The attractive qualities of the wall and the garden are visualised through close-ups of wildlife (spiders, flies, plants), and the wall adopts a further identity as a micro-habitat (see figure 29, below).



Figure 29: Scene: 'The Wall 2'

**Scene 'The Wall 3':**<sup>57</sup> June, sitting in the garden, presents the newly refurbished wall (figure 30, below), which is illustrated through a montage of close-ups of the wall. Then, June's voice gives way to an actress's, reading from the first chapter in June's book, *The Wall* (figure 30). This tells the story of Freya, a thirteenth-century merchant's daughter, who confides in the wall, telling it about her arranged marriage. Several historical timelines and identities are blended here. The refurbished wall is a sedimentation of both the original and the derelict wall; Freya's voice further evokes its original historical identity (in its complete state in a public space) and its identity as a friend; in addition, her fictional voice evokes the wall's identity as simultaneously a literary inspiration and an inspiration for June's identity as a writer. This second part of the scene reveals the wall's filmic identity, overtly rendered and bracketed by the filmmaker. This is reinforced by the ambivalent blending of present and past everyday as the actress's voice overlaps with the sounds of the film's present-day location. This is an obvious shift from previous representations of the wall, in which June was corporeally interacting with it in a coherent spatio-temporal continuum. For a brief moment, the wall becomes part of the film's historicity.

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<sup>57</sup> 26:19

Filmically bracketing the wall also relates to a certain separation that June and the wall have undergone since the first scene. June acknowledges, in the first part of this scene, that since its refurbishment she touches the wall much less, given that there are no more crumbling pieces to put back in place. This lack of interaction is shown through the wide shots where she merely ‘looks’ at but does not interact with it. The wall’s identity as a garden wall is sedimented onto its previous identities and it shifts into the background of the story, mediated through the shot’s composition which places the wall in the background. When the wall adopts its filmic identity, all the spectator experiences are filmic artefacts: close-ups and the actress’s voice-over. Shots of June are completely omitted. This temporarily etic experience evokes June’s affective separation from the wall.



Voice-over (Freya): “She ran onwards, up the street between the market-goers and into a narrow lane beside the wall. ... Its nooks and crannies made it look friendly to her. ... She had always told it her troubles and indeed the few joys she had had. It was her only real friend.”

Figure 30: Scene: ‘The Wall 3’

**Scene ‘The Wall 4’:**<sup>58</sup> June is sitting in her garden, interacting with her cat and her dog (figure 31), and talking about how the wall is responsible for the damp in the living room. She explains that the wall appears to be part of the exterior wall of the house itself, and the porous rock channels the water into the house, as illustrated by a corresponding shot (figure 32). Interestingly, June’s idiolect has a concerned undertone, reminiscent of the first scene, only now she is not concerned at the wall’s deterioration but at the fact it is causing damp and incurring costs, a historical development which the audience can only infer. The fact that June plays

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<sup>58</sup> 36:46

with her pets and does not interact with or even 'look' at the wall is revealing insofar as it shows that the wall has been relegated to being a garden wall, a tacit, utilitarian object, with its former identities mere memories. Post-filmically, this is mediated by the mise-en-scène: the garden bench that was previously positioned perpendicularly to the wall is now facing away from it, placing the wall behind June. This is emphasised by the camera perspective that places the wall once again in the compositional background. In addition, since the shots are static and the audience's visual perception is not focused by any plot-related tasks, the motion in the area where June interacts with her pets attracts the gaze, marginalising the wall even further (see Smith and Mital, 2013). Overall, the audience experiences the wall as peripheral to the present moment, since, apart from its identity as a cost-incurring nuisance, the wall is not part of any conceptual blending. This is editorially reinforced by the almost complete absence of individual shots of the wall, unlike the previous scenes.



Figure 31: Scene: 'The Wall 4'



Figure 32: Dampness

### *The two-shot*

A crucial post-filmic tactic used to mediate corporeal proximity and objectification is the two-shot in different size variations (figures 33-35), especially in the first scene, which mediates the wall's identities that are most intimate to June. Two-shots show two characters within the same frame, without resorting to the shot-reverse-shot cluster. At its basis, the two-shot works through the gestalt law of proximity: stimuli that are closer together are perceived as groups, while stimuli that are not close appear to be separate (Sternberg and Sternberg, 2012, p. 115). The two-shot emphasises proximity through bracketing two subjects from the wider scene, creating a 'homo-spatiality' in which entities inhabit the same space-time coordinates, becoming a unified entity (Carroll, 1996, p. 214). In this case, the two entities are June and the wall.



**Figure 33: The wall as a friend**



**Figure 34: The wall as an object of custodianship**



Figure 35: The wall as a garden wall

A single shot that homo-spatially and homo-temporally frames the perceiving character *and* the perceived object, results in a strong, embodied, cognitive metaphor for perception as an act of *contact* between both entities (Coëgnarts and Kravanja, 2015, pp. 225–227). Thus, in the tradition of objectification, perception does not favour the perceiver over the perceived; rather, it constitutes a relational locus of mediation. It is paramount to emphasise the combination between homo-spatiality and homo-temporality, which means that the two characters are neither spatially separated by cuts (for example, reaction shots and point-of-view shots), nor temporally separated by camera pans (for example, from a close-up of June’s face to a close-up of her hands touching the wall) or zooms. Similarly, the use of split screen or superimposition may also be homogenous in terms of space and time, but it would call attention to the film as an authorial artefact, resulting in an etic experience.

The integrity of the two-shot also mediates June’s spatial anchoring within the general space, but also in relation to the wall. The spectator’s cognitive load is focused on June’s ‘diagnostic’ sensory features that “enable an organism to perceptually recognize the identity, shape, location, and affordances of objects and events in the environment” (Carroll and Seeley, 2013, p. 62). The audience experiences the ‘diagnosticity’ between the two ‘characters’ – their embodied dispositions to interact with each other through speech, approach, turns, ‘looks’ and touch. June’s diagnosticity, which is emphasised by the varying shot sizes of the

two-shot, also mediates the different identities of the wall, such as friend (figure 33), object of custodianship (figure 34) and garden wall (figure 35).

Consequently, there is an intentional limitation of close-ups in the first wall scene, not least because they would fragment and abstract the space, as discussed in the previous chapter. The few close-ups (figure 36) mediate the materiality of the wall, showing rocks, fissures and moss, and one shot of June touching these. However, these close shots are preceded and succeeded by a majority of wider two-shots, so the overall audience experience is informed by the two-shots. Conversely, the use of close-ups and lack of two-shots in the second part of the third scene has the reverse effect of breaking the unity between June and the wall. In the last scene, the shots do feature both ‘characters’, but because of the lack of corporeal interaction and the wall’s situation in the background, the shots are not two-shots as such, since June is foregrounded and she attracts the gaze through her movements (interacting with her pets). In these shots, there is still a certain homo-spatiality, but the wall constitutes its periphery.

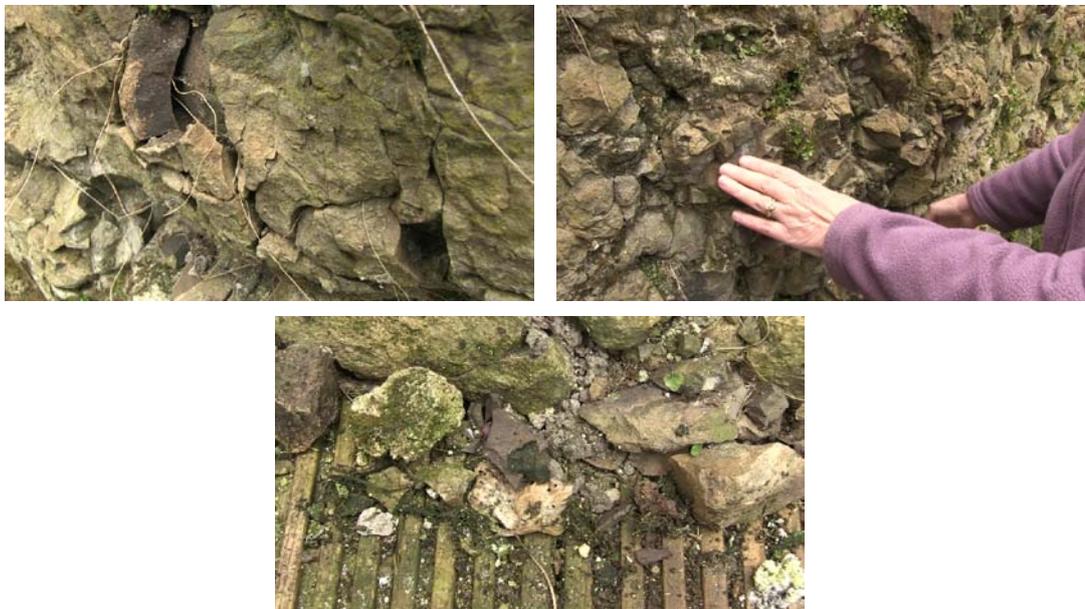


Figure 36: Close-ups

## 5.4 The domestic space

### 5.4.1 Pre-filmic methods

#### *The home*

According to Dant (1999, p. 60), “[a]s well as being a material entity itself, the house is a locus for material culture, a meeting point for people and things, in which social relationships and material relationships are almost indistinguishable because both are bound together in the routine practice of everyday life”. The home may offer the best display for Baudrillard’s ‘private totality’, as it holds the collection of possessed, but also utilised, objects. Through this collection of ordinary things, which the collector can see, touch, hear and smell, the home as a *space* becomes a *place* of intimacy, whereby the locus of intimacy is not inside us but evoked through experiencing the collection (Tuan, 1977, p. 144).

However, the concept of home is not straightforward. For instance, David Morley (2000) highlights the semantic heterogeneity of the concept by discussing the home as a construct based on individual and collective identity, media and mobility, including not only dwelling spaces, but also, among other things, communities, localities and territorialities. Mary Douglas (1991, p. 289) defines home as a space under control, where control delineates the ability to establish and temporally maintain a certain structure or appearance. Morley’s and Douglas’s definitions are useful, especially since the idea of home needs to be tailored to the everyday experience of the individual characters. For instance, Terry rarely leaves his domestic space, not even to explore the small park behind his house, although he loves nature, especially trees. During my encounters with him both inside and outside his domestic space, I noticed that this hermitic life style is a result of his perception of the ‘outside’ world as beyond his control. Inside, the totality of objects has a particular structure that allows Terry to easily navigate around the flat.

In contrast to Terry’s small apartment, June lives in a bigger home, which has resulted in her spatial awareness being more honed and flexible when it comes to novel material situations. For example, in every wall scene, the garden has a

different arrangement of the bench, flower pots and other objects, and each time June appears to master the change in spatial structure. Her spatial acuity also shows when she moves through Harwich, her small home town, which, unlike Terry's noisy urban environment, has relatively little traffic and where the noises of sea, birds, people, boats and cars are moderate enough to be distinguishable and not merely a cacophony. Hence, June's concept of home expands beyond her actual house. This is manifest in her profound historical knowledge of Harwich (which she displays in several scenes) and through the fact that she has bought additional properties in the town: a second house (for guests or to rent out) and two beach huts. June's extended experience of home is also post-filmically mediated by showing a variety of scenes with June taking place in local public places, whereas all the scenes with Terry and Pam are located in their tiny flat.

#### *Disability and the home*

The decision concerning which domestic activities to film was not only dictated by everyday life, but also by issues of representation, since this project aims to neither normalise nor exoticise disability. If all post-filmic encounters showed Terry or June performing domestic activities that highlight the fact they are inhibited by their disability, then the audience would experience them as other. Conversely, if all encounters intentionally obscured their disability, then it would deny an essential factor of emic experience. For this reason, I chose to film activities that offer a balance between these two poles, one that relates to the characters' own consciousness of their bodies. According to Rob Imrie (2004, p. 751), in everyday domestic life, the body tends to disappear from consciousness – until it asserts itself through pain, disease or bodily dysfunction, when the impaired body becomes conscious and is “experienced ‘as-alien-being-in-the-world’”, especially during embodied encounters with spatial norms that cater primarily for non-disabled people.

Examples of the conscious and alienated body are seen when Pam describes an illustration of a painting to Terry, leading his finger over the page to give him a haptic sense of the composition (figure 37), and when Terry accidentally bumps into

my camera, dropping his cigarette. June, meanwhile, is shown several times being guided by David as they walk through Harwich (figure 38), instead of walking on her own with a stick (which she could do, but would find more difficult). Furthermore, in several outdoor scenes, David gives June descriptions of specific objects in the environment, such as the position of sailing boats (figure 39).



**Figure 37: Terry being body-conscious**



**Figure 38: David guiding June**



**Figure 39: David describing objects in the environment for June**

Examples of the unconscious body – when the disability is not consciously perceived as an inhibitor – occur when Terry is preparing the plasticine for his painting (figure 40) and June is knitting (figure 41). However, numerous other scenes, such as June putting away the dishes (figure 42), show an oscillation between Imrie’s two bodily states, reinforcing the notion of the disabled body as an ordinary part of the two characters’ everyday lives.



**Figure 40: Preparing plasticine**



Figure 41: Knitting



Figure 42: Putting away dishes

#### 5.4.2 Post-filmic methods

##### *The Rückenfigur*

The mediation of the characters as an objectified part of their domestic material totality is conceptualised through the motif of the *Rückenfigur* (back figure), a trope found in several paintings, in which characters seem to merge with their surroundings, creating one material unity, especially if the colour or luminosity of space and bodies match (figure 43).

		
<p><i>The Art of Painting</i> (J. Vermeer, 1665 – 1668)</p>	<p><i>Man at his Desk</i> (G. F. Kersting, 1811)</p>	<p><i>Woman at a Window</i> (C. D. Friedrich, 1822)</p>
		
<p><i>Looking Back</i> (Michael King, n.d.)</p>	<p><i>Girl in the Kitchen</i> (Anne Ancher, 1886)</p>	<p><i>Sunlight in the Blue Room</i> (Anne Ancher, 1891)</p>
		
<p><i>Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon</i> (C. D. Friedrich, 1824)</p>	<p><i>Summer Evening on Skagen Southern Beach with Anna Ancher and Marie Krøyer</i> (P. S. Krøyer, 1893)</p>	

Figure 43: Rückenfigur

Willi Wolfradts (cited in Sugiyama, 2009, p. 6), referring to Caspar David Friedrich's *Rückenfigur* paintings, identifies a reciprocity of two elements: the landscape (or space) and the human being. The back figure within the space manifests the consonance between the *Weltseele* ('world soul' or *anima mundi*) and *Einzelseele* (individual soul). For Herbert Von Einem (cited in Sugiyama, 2009, p. 6), the human being and the space exist in reference to each other, and are creatures of the 'whole'. The *anima mundi* concept both writers allude to has a parallel in the anthropological concept of objectification, where the boundaries between animate and inanimate are transcended and objects are seen as embodiments of their human possessors/perceivers/producers/users, and vice versa. Arguably, in this context, and in relation to the back shot scenes in my films, the back figure evokes an engagement with the *anima mundi materialis*.

Below are examples of back shots (figure 44), in which the characters' bodies 'objectify' the surrounding space, placing June and Terry as part of their very possessed 'private totalities'. Note that most back-shot filming was carried out when characters wore clothes that, due to their colour and luminosity, seemed to merge with their environment. Also, these scenes were carefully framed so that the audience not only sees the main character's back, but also the surrounding clutter of objects. According to James Cutting and Kacie Armstrong (2016, p. 896), this background clutter can be defined as "structured ground against which a figure appears", and it can be measured by, among other things, the salience of image features and the relative number of edges in the image. To increase the clutter around the bodies, my back shots augment the density of the features and edges in the surrounding space, which is a result of *mise-en-scène* (busy spaces), shot size (wider shots that increase clutter),<sup>59</sup> focal length (deep focus that increases clutter)<sup>60</sup> and framing (congested foregrounds that frame characters and place them in mid-ground).

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<sup>59</sup> See Cutting and Armstrong (2016)

<sup>60</sup> See Cutting and Armstrong (2016)

**June making coffee**



**June and David at the beach hut**



**Terry painting**



**Terry and Pam solving a crossword**



**Figure 44: Back shots of Terry and June**

Cluttering my back shots was a deliberate strategy as it impedes object identification (Cutting and Armstrong, 2016; Levi, 2008). In this way, bodies and body movements appear to merge with the material environment, and this is emphasised by the choice of back shots displaying a high affinity (in terms of colour and luminosity) between the characters and the space, as well as by the omission of faces, which would distract the spectator's gaze away from the overall space. Generally, film scenes provide the audience with 'frontality', in order to guide the viewer's attention to facial expressions (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008, p. 152), eliciting an affective response (Plantinga, 1999, p. 240). However, in the back shot, the body is robbed of its subjective identity and itself becomes part of the characters' private totality of material possessions, thus mediating objectification and the situatedness of the moment. Nevertheless, with regards to Plantinga's (1999) and Smith's (1994) empathy theories, which highlight the importance of facial recognition, too many back shots in the films would inevitably 'other' the characters. Therefore, all of these shots appear later in the narrative, when the audience has already become familiar with the characters' different facial expressions.

### *The wide static long take*

To sustain the experience of objectification, most back shots are wide and static, and last for a long duration (this is sometimes referred to as a ‘tableau shot’); hence, it is a locus where the pre-filmic and post-filmic inextricably merge. For example, in one scene, Terry makes tea and then sits down to have a chat with Pam about moving to a bigger home<sup>61</sup> (figure 45).



**Figure 45: Terry and Pam talking about a bigger home**

The shot shows Pam’s back and inhibits Terry’s frontality. Pre-filmically, the long take’s advantage lies in the fact that the characters were not distracted by my moving around, trying to get the best perspectives; they engaged in conversations that naturally flowed from one topic to another, sometimes with clear associations, sometimes randomly, but ultimately focusing on how little space they have and how they need to move to a bigger flat. The topic of their conversation is efficiently mediated through the long take of the cluttered space, which leaves little room for moving or even sitting. Terry’s negative experience of his home is mediated through using visual cluttering techniques (identified above) throughout the film, not only in back shots. With reference to Smith’s (1994) character engagement model, mentioned above, this creates a spectatorial spatial alignment between the spectator and Terry, which embodies subjective access to Terry’s feelings about his home.

The wide static long take also emphasises the everyday oscillation between body-consciousness and body-unconsciousness with regards to disability. Terry

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<sup>61</sup> Scene: ‘Bigger Home’ - 06:22

moves fairly ably through the flat, but in some instances he subtly touches pieces of furniture and other objects (such as the kitchen towel – see figure 45) to navigate his way around. As in Miller’s interpretation of objectification, it could be argued that the autonomy and agency of material space determines Terry’s movements through ‘bodily affordances’.<sup>62</sup> As Miller (2001, p. 4) observes, the home is not only the product of human agency, but it is an agent itself.

Furthermore, the audience’s gaze is not only prone to perceive material space, but it also becomes spectatorially divergent. Tim Smith (2013, p. 183) shows that the wider, the longer and the more static a shot, the more dispersed and less clustered the gaze as it scans the screen, especially if there is an absence of human faces and the visual composition or plot does not direct the gaze to specific areas. This *endogenous* control of the gaze is determined by the spectator’s subjectivity (desires), and it results in a less predictable and more subjective focal attention (Hasson *et al.*, 2008; Smith, 2013). In other words, the lack of narrative and aesthetic cues or stimuli, and the focus on the present moment, creates an attentional ambiguity that prompts the viewer’s gaze to roam idiosyncratically around the entire image until it comes to rest on a preferred point (possibly Terry or Pam).



Figure 46: Scene: ‘Conceptual Art’

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<sup>62</sup> For an explanation of Gibson’s (1986) ‘affordance theory’, see Chapter Three

The agency of the space also apparently prompts Terry and Pam to discuss 'space', without any cues from me; they discuss the amount of rooms they need to accommodate Terry's paintings and Pam's books. In another scene<sup>63</sup> (figure 46) they discuss conceptual art. Pam reads Terry a newspaper article about a large boat that was scuttled as part of an artistic performance; Terry, not impressed, sarcastically proposes his own idea of conceptual art: a film camera fixed at the bottom of a toilet. Terry's imaginary art object carries several innuendos. Apart from the scatological reference to the quality and value of conceptual art (which Terry detests), there is a clear reference to the camera that is filming him, and the audience itself. His frequently sarcastic remarks exhibit his love-hate relationship with the camera, but also his performance for the audience, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. It is also interesting that he juxtaposes the camera, the most ordinary object in the filming process, and the toilet, one of the most ordinary objects in a home. Thus, Terry brackets and conceptually blends two of the most 'blindingly obvious' objects (to use Miller's earlier reference) within their own private totalities, the pro-filmic and the filmic.

Using the wide static long take, with its lack of insert shots or other vantage points, in combination with a clear denial of frontality, is also an embodiment of MacDougall's deep reflexivity (see Chapter Three), a *tableau vivant* that exposes an audience to the post-filmic act of bracketing this encounter through the camera frame. Contradicting André Bazin's theory of experiencing diegetic realism through the long take, Peter Wollen (cited in Hill and Gibson, 1998, pp. 28–29) identifies the long take as a mannerist, Brechtian tableau dramaturgy, where duration becomes an overt stylistic feature, which is reinforced if the camera is static. In addition, the departure from the spectatorially expected continuity editing (or at least from invisible elliptical cuts to compress time) is in itself reflexive (Nichols, 2001, p. 128). This results in the spectator experiencing the camera as an embodiment not only of the apparatus, but also of the filmmaker him/herself. As Nichols (1991, p. 85) puts it, "the camera becomes more than an anthropomorphic symbol and locus. It becomes the physical embodiment of the human being behind it." Jay Ruby (2005,

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<sup>63</sup> Scene: 'Conceptual Art' - 29:18

p. 35) argues that filmmakers have an ethical obligation to be reflexive, but although a more conspicuous, 'non-deep' reflexivity would mediate etic experience, the long, static back shot provides an ambivalence where the emic and etic are temporarily blended.

### *Cross-cutting*

June's extended home is explored in a montage sequence that depicts Harwich and Walthamstow in London, where June used to live before moving.<sup>64</sup> Binary opposites in terms of visuals and sounds are used to mediate June's motivation for moving out of London, and the peace and inspiration she has found in Harwich, resulting in a traditional intellectual montage in Eisenstein's tradition (figure 47). For example, all the wide shots of London depict busy streets, emphasising the crowds and lack of depth and space through the visual composition. By contrast, the Harwich wide shots emphasise space and depth. The soundscape is also diametrically opposed: London's cacophony of traffic and people is juxtaposed with Harwich's subtle sounds of the sea, the voices of individual pedestrians and the sound of occasional cars. The common denominator of this conceptual blending is June's voice-over, which briefly explains her move from London to Harwich.



Figure 47: Scene: 'From London to Harwich'

Although this strategy adheres to folk-psychological narrative formulas in its use of binary opposites (urban/rural, land/sea, confusion/tranquillity) to mediate June's reasons for moving, these opposites do not relate to June's disability but

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<sup>64</sup> Scene: 'From London to Harwich' – 11:41

compare everyday life in London, as lived and recounted by June, and everyday life in Harwich, as lived by her now and as experienced through the film. Further, these opposites, according to the theory of conceptual blending, merge into a new ambivalent mental space, in which their opposition transcends into a new, everyday for June – a sedimented everyday, whose past layers have triggered her affinity towards Harwich as an extended home. Similar to the first two wall scenes, this montage sequence blends different historical identities of June, and embodies a filmic bracketing that makes the spectator experience the film artefact, though on an emic level. As with the long take, it is a form of deep reflexivity that mediates the mediation of emic experience.

### *Still life*

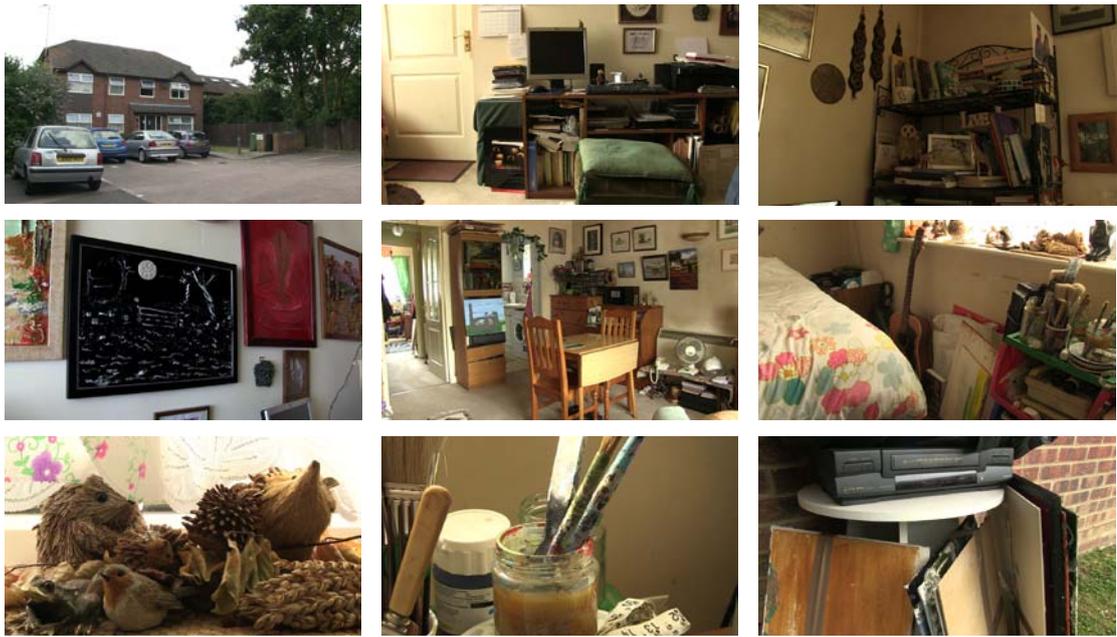
Another post-filmic strategy to mediate the everydayness of the domestic interior is inspired by still-life paintings. A montage of filmed shots of inanimate objects and spaces in Terry's<sup>65</sup> and June's<sup>66</sup> homes without the bodily presence of the characters occurs in one scene in each film respectively, giving an overview of their very distinct domestic spaces (figure 48). As Terry is a painter, there is an entire scene in his film called 'Still Life', which resembles a montage of still-life motifs. On the other hand, the shots of June's home are part of the London-Harwich scene, and they include still-life shots of her extended home (Harwich), as well as her actual house.

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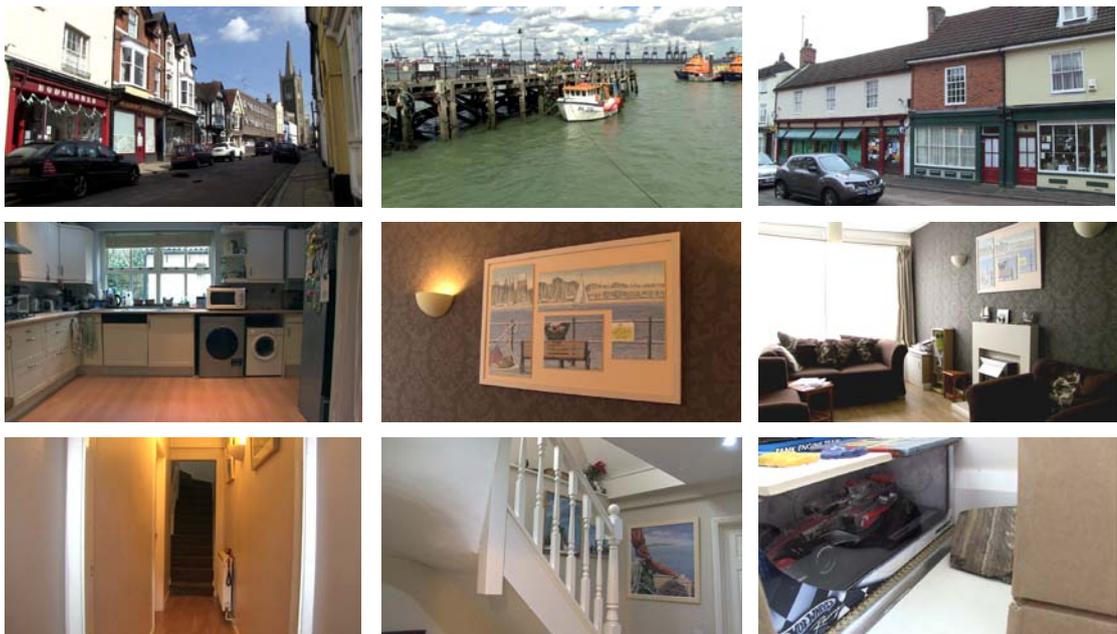
<sup>65</sup> Scene: 'Still Life' – 13:00

<sup>66</sup> Scene: 'From London to Harwich' – 12:49

**Terry – Scene: ‘Still Life’**



**June – Scene: ‘From London to Harwich’**



**Figure 48: Still lives**

The main purpose of these scenes is for the spectator to experience material artefacts as, in Baudrillard’s term, a ‘collection’ of tools and possessions. It would seem that this strategy goes against emic experience and the concept of objectification. However, the depicted spaces and objects in these scenes are not completely divorced from their human counterparts, since they occur in the middle

of the films, after Terry and June have been established in terms of facial and bodily recognition and anchored in their respective domestic spaces. The spectator perceives these objects as constituting the characters' private totality, which is reinforced by several of the spaces and objects, such as the brush and the stone, appearing in other scenes. All the shots show the objects at rest, enabling the audience to connect to the "thingly actuality" of these ordinary things (Highmore, 2011, p. 59).

The still lives also stress the material affordances of their domestic space. As mentioned previously, affordances constitute the relations between an organism and an object that affords the opportunity for that organism to perform an action. Affordance involves the action-readiness of the organism, as well as the physical qualities of the objects. The still-life scenes mediate the physical qualities of the space in relation to spatial motility, inferring whether potential action-readinesses for characters would call the disabled body into consciousness or not. For instance, in Terry's small flat, the material clutter results in low affordances in terms of body movement, which is exemplified in other scenes where Terry has to touch objects in order to navigate. Overall, this aligns with Terry's frequent consciousness of his disabled body, experiencing it as 'alien-being-in-the-world', to use Imrie's term. This is embodied by numerous on-camera references to being blind, which is further discussed in the next chapter. Conversely, in June's house, the large spaces result in high body-movement affordance, which can be experienced, for example, in the coffee-making scene. This aligns with the fact that she makes almost no on-camera references about her blindness, mediating her disabled body as an implicit, not alienating, part of her everyday life.

In a similar way to the previous tableau shots, the still-life aesthetic conjures up the private totality of everyday things, mediating ordinariness and a diversity of particular character traits through the depiction of a plethora of particular objects and spaces. These are captured through a range of shot sizes (wide shots, medium shots, close-ups), in order to prevent the fragmentation of space and to anchor particular objects into a larger space. The still-life aesthetic is another form of filmic bracketing that is deeply reflexive, especially since non-diegetic sound is used in

both cases. Terry's sequence is overlaid with a piece of music, the significance of which will be discussed in the next chapter, and June's sequence is overlaid with an actress's voice-over quoting related passages from her autobiography. Hence, this authorial bracketing works not only on an aesthetic level, but also on a narrative level, since these are very rare but prominent instances of the use of non-diegetic sound – at the same time, however, the ordinariness of the things themselves is mediated. Ordinary objects which are usually relegated to the periphery, escaping the viewer's visual awareness as they are 'blindingly obvious', are foregrounded. This places the audience in an anamorphic position that ambiguously highlights the objects' ordinariness by making them extraordinary. It could be even argued that, through the reflexive bracketing techniques mentioned earlier, the spectator has a metacognitive experience, becoming aware of the way he/she generally ignores ordinary, vernacular objects and spaces.

## **5.5 The intersubjective object**

### **5.5.1 Pre-filmic methods**

Objects also mediate intersubjectively between people (Dant, 1999). Søren Overgaard and Dan Zahavi (2009) deem intersubjectivity the foundation of social reality (p. 93), which can be investigated through one subject's experiential access to another (p. 101). In the scene 'June and David',<sup>67</sup> for example, June explains the meaning of the Claddagh rings she and David are wearing, and how these rings symbolise their deep connection, while David listens (figure 49). The rings have several functions in relation to intersubjective mediation. Firstly, they function as a symbolic code: as signifiers they communicate their meaning to others, performing a quasi-social task (Woodward, 2007, p. 58). They stand for June's and David's commitment to and affection towards each other, which is brought the fore when June consciously talks about their relationship, thus entering into Richardson's self-conscious mode of being. However, the rings do not only signify their relationship but also its status – as June explains, if the crown looks upward, the woman is not

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<sup>67</sup> 21:46

available, if it looks downward, she is either widowed or has fallen out with her partner. David's facial and bodily reactions embody the momentary and historical intersubjectivity elicited by the rings. The rings' symbolism is not established by the film in order to be interpreted by the audience, but is expressed by June as part of her emic experience.



Figure 49: June's and David's rings

Further, the rings embody the couple's relationship aesthetically. In the context of consumption practices, objects express the individual's own stylistic preferences and signify socio-economic status (Woodward, 2007, pp. 113–114). June mentions that "cheap and nasty ones" are available, but she and David bought theirs at a quality jewellery shop and did not even enquire about the price before purchasing them, which surprised the shop assistant as they are made of expensive Irish gold. Thus, the aesthetic quality of the gold mediates June's and David's socio-economic status, as well as the strength of their bond. My personal impression during that encounter was that June mentions the rings' economic and material value because she wants to express their commitment to each other and not her social status, although the rings clearly embody both. In addition, the fact that June talks about this intimate relationship in a public space – the local pier – mediates her experience of the home, which extends beyond the wall of her house into the town itself.

In another example (Scene: 'Terry'<sup>68</sup>), Pam describes an illustration of a painting in an art book to Terry, an everyday activity they undertake to maintain his

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<sup>68</sup> 00:04

visual memory (figure 50). The book is primarily an intersubjective mediator rather than a signifier: it mediates an intimate moment of trust, in which Terry fully relies on Pam's verbal cues to create a mental representation of the painting. This simulacrum is painstakingly created through a series of repetitive question and answers, haptic interactions (for example, Pam leading Terry's finger over the page in order to spatially grasp the composition) and moments of silence in which Terry attempts to mentally complete the simulacrum. The book does not just mediate between the couple in terms of communication, but also in terms of affective corporeality, prompting them to touch each other's hands and sit close to one another, embodying the closeness of their relationship.



Figure 50: Pam describing a painting to Terry

However, the book also embodies Terry's fading visual memory and the extent of his dependence on Pam; he is not able to acquire the visual knowledge by himself and needs Pam to act as a mediator. This is manifest through Pam's verbal and tactile attempts to transfer that knowledge from the book to Terry. In this sense, both the book *and* Pam are mediating agents, while Terry is the receiver of that mediation, being clearly at an epistemological disadvantage. However, overall in the film, Terry is not disadvantaged, since Pam's act of verbal description is only an ordinary, but not essential, part of his everyday life. Rather than an act that helps him fulfil more basic needs such as making tea (which indeed he does on his own in another scene), it is a moment of social reality, in which each character has experiential access to the other.

## 5.5.2 Post-filmic methods

### *Repetitions and camera framing*

The above scene involves several structural repetitions and circularities in order to mediate Pam's effort to describe the painting to Terry, and his effort to visualise it. The conventional editing process is usually supposed to simplify scenes by creating a logical progression and omitting non-relevant or repeated plot points. In this scene, however, I do exactly the opposite. For example, Terry keeps asking about the direction of the river in the painting as he tries to recreate the visual perspective in his mind. At the end of the scene, it is still not clear whether he can properly visualise it or not.

In terms of framing, the scene also uses a variety of two-shots that mediate the intersubjectivity of both characters, but these two-shots also include close-ups that show both their hands and the book (figure 51). The wider shots mediate bodily intersubjectivity, while the close shots mediate haptic intersubjectivity.



Figure 51: Two-shots of Terry and Pam

## *Mood*

The main post-filmic strategy for the ring scene, which took place on the local pier, is the mediation of a certain mood that relates to the warm and intimate relationship between June and David, as well as to the aesthetic qualities of the rings. According to Greg Smith (2003, p. 38), a “mood is a preparatory state in which one is seeking an opportunity to express a particular emotion”. Moods are states of expectancies that make us open to cues that will elicit emotions, and these states encourage us “to evaluate the environment in a mood-congruent fashion” (p. 38). On the one hand, we may be at home on a dark, rainy day, for example, but if our mood is positive, we are bound to perceive environmental cues, such as the sound of the rain against the window, as equally joyful sensory stimuli that contribute to how we feel. If, on the other hand, we are in a melancholy mood, we may perceive the same sound as a form of Chinese water torture. A mood sustains the evaluation of and openness towards emotive cues, but a series of emotive cues are necessary to maintain the mood – mood and emotion sustain each other (p. 42).

The emotive cues in the ring scene include a variety of shots of June and David walking arm-in-arm to the pier, the sea, the sunset, and June and David sitting together, with their bodies reflecting the warm sunlight (figure 52). In conjunction with June’s description of the rings, these shots create a calm, warm, intimate mood that not only mediates their relationship, but also the materiality of the rings in terms of their golden, lustrous surfaces. Smith calls these emotive cues, ‘emotion markers’, which engage the viewer and through aesthetic cues prompt a brief burst of emotion (joy, for example) not linked to narrative themes or plot development (p. 44). This is a crucial strategy in several other scenes, since my films aim to prevent the formation of folk-psychological narrative formulas in which emotion is based on the appraisal of narrative scenarios; instead, they elicit momentary emotions, for which Smith’s mood-cue approach is an efficient method – it also represents a cognitive model that can address audience experience beyond mere cognition (see Chapter Two).

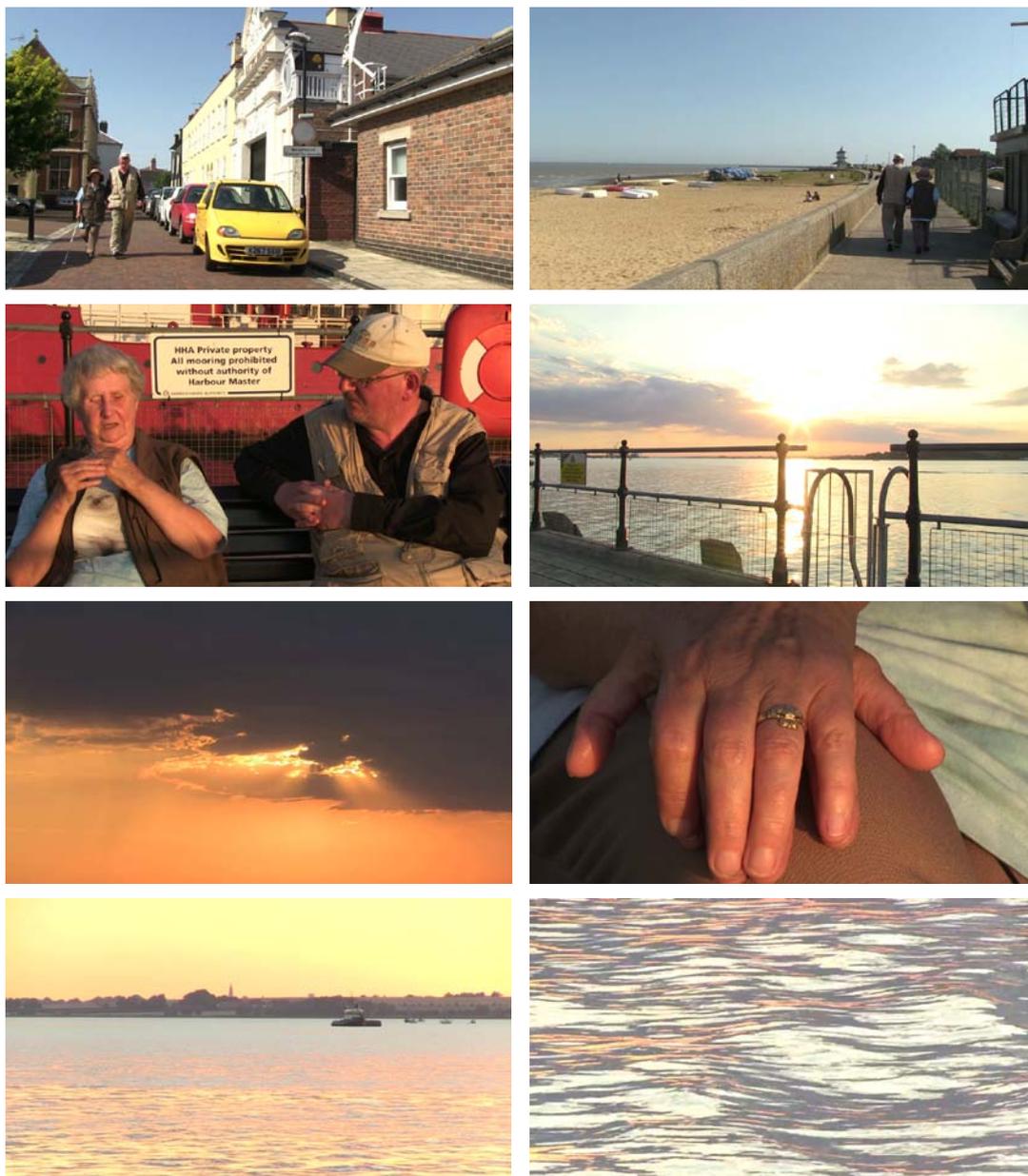


Figure 52: Emotion markers

## 5.6 Conclusion

The above examples of mediating everyday emic experience have shown that filmic mediation inherently blends screen characters', the filmmaker's and the spectator's experience. Thus, mediating the everyday operates on an oscillating boundary between simultaneously observing and bracketing the ordinary. The mediated everyday is both ordinary and extraordinary at one and the same time, whereby the extraordinariness could be regarded as the post-filmic ordinary – a deep reflexivity

that, to a certain degree, permeates both films to different degrees. Consequently, as with the emic experience of a blind person, the everyday cannot be *immediated* (conveyed without mediation); the spectator experiences it as a pre-filmically and post-filmically transformed version. However, the researcher should perhaps not strive to mediate the actual everyday, but *everydayness* (Highmore, 2002b, pp. 24–28), and this sense of the everyday needs spectatorship as an essential part of its construction. The next chapter explores this spectatorial construction through narrative strategies.

## Chapter Six: Ordinary Temporalities

### 6.1 Introduction

Whereas the previous chapter was concerned with ordinary material experiences in the moment, the focus of this chapter is on mapping and capturing the temporal aspects of accumulated everyday experience as manifested in the totality of individual pre-filmic and post-filmic encounters. Accumulated everyday experience is the essence of Pierre Bourdieu's (1990, p. 53) concept of 'habitus', which he defines as a system of implicit dispositions that generate and organise ordinary, everyday practices. The habitus is both structured and structuring: it is *structured* by the individual's historicity of dispositions and experiences, and is *structuring* because it determines present and future practices, including perceptions, appreciations, beliefs and representations (pp. 53-58). The habitus is a structure that is "systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned" (Maton, 2008, p. 51).

Mapping the habitus is essential for mediating the temporality of everydayness. However, given that my filmic mediation simultaneously entails observation and bracketing, the mediation of Terry's and June's respective habitus requires the consideration of my own filmmaking habitus. Furthermore, the post-filmic mediation of everyday temporalities needs to relate to the viewing habitus of the spectator, which is geared with the narrative habitus that depends on their accumulation of experience and knowledge during the viewing of the film. As MacDougall (1998, p. 81) confirms, "film is cumulative, in the sense that it builds up understandings through an accretion of scenes, often bringing a particular pattern to the surface retrospectively in a moment of crystallization". Thus, the narrative structures the experiences of the characters into a film-temporal structure, and simultaneously structures the audience's experience. These two structuring processes need to be aligned in order to mediate everyday time.

Analysing literary narratives, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, p. 248) describes everyday time as simple, crude, viscous time, which "drags itself slowly through

space”; it is mostly used as ancillary, background time that hosts cyclical sequences that serve as a contrast to non-cyclical sequences that are “charged with energy and event”. Similarly, Richard Kilborn and John Izod (1997, p. 69) argue that the normality of the everyday in documentary narratives can be seen as “periods of dead time”, devoid of narrative significance but showing how people get on “with what we take to be their normal lives”. This dead, viscous time is not always cyclical, however. As Ellis (2007, p. 59) reminds us, the ordinary also includes “the contingent, that which just chanced to happen”. The everyday layer of random and unpredictable appears contrary to the habit and routine of the systematic habitus and to Bakhtin’s notion of cyclicity. In fact, the everyday is all of these: it is a constant stream of “relations, scenes, contingencies and emergences” (Stewart, 2007, p. 2), and its different rhythms, moods and feelings are constantly in flux (Highmore, 2011, p. 1). Everydayness therefore needs to be mediated as repetitive and cyclical, but also as chaotic, random, evolving and unpredictable, and it is the task of the narrative habitus to achieve this.

As this chapter focuses particularly on the narrative and viewing habitus, most case studies are elaborated on a post-filmic rather than a pre-filmic level, and relate not only to narrative structuring, but also to the structuring of individual scenes in relation to their impact on the entire narrative. As previously, pre-filmic and post-filmic methods are signposted as such.

## **6.2 The narrative fragment**

### **6.2.1 Pre-filmic methods**

#### *Database filmmaking*

The characters’ and my own circumstances had a considerable impact on the films and the filmmaking process. My filming time with Terry and June was limited, due to their age (June especially found the filming physically draining after a few hours), an understandable reluctance on their part to have their privacy invaded for more than a day at a time, and my teaching and other research commitments. The one-

day shooting periods with long breaks in-between made the characters feel more comfortable and ready to participate. Parallel to these sporadic encounters, I wrote several publications and gave conference presentations about this project, and this entailed editing a range of scenes to demonstrate my methodology. As it was impossible to finalise the narrative before the end of shooting, each edited scene corresponded to a specific encounter with Terry or June, rendering each scene a self-contained fragment of their lives.

This method relates to Wyn Mason's (2012, p. 144) concept of 'database filmmaking', in which he adapts Lev Manovich's concept of the 'database cinema' to the filmmaking process. Mason describes it as the compilation of a raw-material database that informs the final post-production process without the pre-fabrication of a scripted narrative. This kind of practice allows the celebration of visual artistry and the focus on subjective experience within the moment, rather than one that is confined to top-down narrative practices where images or scenes have clear narrative functions (p. 144, p. 150). This bottom-up approach, in which the narrative is shaped by selecting encounters from a database, is an efficient technique to mediate embodied experience within the moment and avoid the formation of folk-psychological plot journeys. This is also illustrated by my initial conceptualisation of individual scenes (the 'raw materials') in Chapter Five – the derivation of the narrative conceptualisation in this chapter.

In addition, database filmmaking relieved me of the pressure to devise plot journeys that would dictate what to film, and resulted in the collection of a multitude of unrelated encounters, or encounters that only partially cover larger developments. This means that gaps and ambiguities automatically arise in the films that prevent totalised or schematic character portrayals, inherently mediating alterity. Both pre-filmically and post-filmically, this phenomenon manifests itself through singular encounters that defy a coherent contextualisation, and recurrent encounters (for example, between June and the wall) that imply a larger development, yet seemingly start *in medias res*, are open-ended or exhibit large gaps that create ambiguity.

## 6.2.2 Post-filmic methods

### *The narrative episode<sup>69</sup> and the everyday*

Database filmmaking results in ‘mosaic narratives’, in which the “whole is not organized as a narrative but more poetically, as a mosaic; only the parts have a diegetic unity” (Nichols, 1981, p. 211) . Smith (2007) analyses the way this type of narrative structure is used as an alternative to folk-psychological narratives in the documentary, *The Aristocrats* (2005), a film in which the same joke is repeatedly performed and interpreted by different comedians. He observes that its episodic structure focuses on self-enclosed fragments, each of which are singular moments that highlight the performative act itself without setting up any character development or cause-and-effect (or question-and-answer) chains, thus undermining any narrative impulse towards forward progression or the infamous ‘narrative arc’ (pp. 87-88).

Narrative ‘episoding’ enables the mediation of everydayness, embodied experience and alterity – the main ingredients that make up the self. According to Harvie Ferguson (2009, pp. 156–157), the self in contemporary everyday life is a fragmented project in the process of constant transformation and shaped by disconnection and discontinuity; everyday life is the arena of this fragmentation, in which all fragments appear without any established priority.<sup>70</sup> Not surprisingly, the fragment has become the favourite literary trope for mediating ordinary experience (p. 155). For instance, anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007, p. 5) mediates the everydayness of her ethnographic accounts in the US by structuring the book as an “assemblage of disparate scenes that pull the course of the book into a tangle of trajectories, connections, and disjunctures”. As Highmore comments (2011, p. 8), Stewart offers no explicit academic theory or methodology,

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<sup>69</sup> For the sake of practical simplicity, the terms ‘episode’ and ‘fragment’ will be used interchangeably, since different theorists have used one or the other to describe the same concept – a small part pertaining to a bigger whole yet existing on its own (see, for example, Highmore, 2002a, pp. 33–44).

<sup>70</sup> For a sociological elaboration of the contemporary everyday as an accumulation of fragments, see Highmore’s (2002a, pp. 33–44) discussion of Georg Simmel.

but her experiential and episodic field-diary-like narration makes the reader alert to his/her own ordinary surroundings.

Examples of two films that resemble Stewart's narrative strategy (and have inspired my work) are Jørgen Leth's *66 Scenes from America* (1982) and François Girard's *Thirty-two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (1993). Leth's documentary is a collage of sixty-six tableau scenes that, although apparently structured in a random fashion, result in a coherent, emblematic picture of ordinariness in the US (figure 53). Girard's film is a mosaic of fragments about the pianist Glenn Gould's life, consisting of dramatised, documentary, animated and experimental segments that collectively mediate Gould's idiosyncratic character as emic ordinary experience (figure 54). Both films use a variety of fragmenting strategies that mediate ordinariness and a sense of alterity through the creation of gaps and ambiguities.



Figure 53: Jørgen Leth's *66 Scenes from America* (1982)



Figure 54: François Girard's *Thirty-two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (1993)

### *Creating the fragment*

Most scenes in Terry's and June's films resemble self-contained short films that possess two common denominators. The first is that almost every scene apparently takes place in real time, in order to focus on momentary experience. This is achieved through long takes and continuity editing, using invisible elliptical cuts (see Chapter Five) to create the illusion of real time when larger pro-filmic events had to be edited to under four minutes – the maximum duration of any scene is three-and-a-half minutes, a heuristic choice to prevent the spectator from losing attention or interest. The second common denominator is that most scenes start and finish *in medias res*: the viewers do not know how they got to a specific starting point, nor do they know why the scene finishes at a particular moment. The resulting openness and ambiguity counteract any expectation of totalised knowledge in terms of Terry's and June's character traits, family and social relationships, their motivations for larger actions, or the outcomes of implied journeys. Fragmenting Terry and June preserves their alterity and prevents them from becoming folk-psychological stock characters.

For instance, in the scene where Terry and Pam discuss the size of their flat and whether to move to a new home<sup>71</sup> (figure 55), the discussion starts almost randomly; it is neither based on any previous event, nor any exposition about their living circumstances. The discussion also implies that they have talked about it before, which reveals the sedimentation of past experience and embodies their shared habitus. The scene, which is never used again in the narrative, finishes in an open-ended way, without any concrete decisions. In addition, the topic is never discussed again, so by the end of the film the spectator has to infer that they have still not moved home, though the reasons why are unclear.



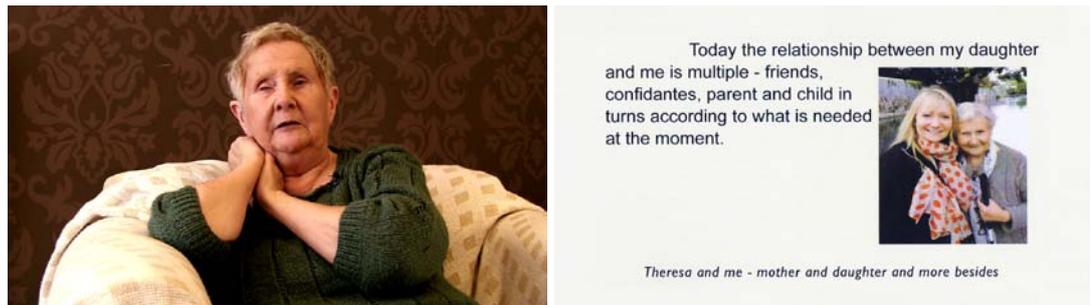
Figure 55: Scene: 'Bigger Home'

Similarly, in June's film, one fragment starts with an interview where she recounts a past episode with her daughter, followed by an archive shot and on-screen quotation from June's autobiography<sup>72</sup> (figure 56). However, the viewers have not heard about her daughter before, nor will they ever hear about her again. Also, this particular interview does not recur in the narrative, which, as with Terry's scene, makes it an inchoate moment clearly extracted from a longer conversation or set-up.

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<sup>71</sup> Scene: 'Bigger Home' – 06:22

<sup>72</sup> Scene: 'June and Theresa' – 14:42



**Figure 56: Scene: 'June and Theresa'**

The inference of a larger invisible context, what Kracauer (1960, p. 251) calls the 'flow of life', is essential to the mediation of the everyday. Episodic encounters emerge from this context, and then disappear. For Kracauer, the cinematic quality of a narrative episode in relation to the materiality of everyday life depends on the permeability of that 'flow of life' within it (p. 254). The more it appears to the viewer that a fragment has emerged from that invisible everyday continuum, the more the viewer experiences the elusive flow of the post-filmic everyday without empirically perceiving it – the flow is explicitly implied. The deliberate omission of context, prompting the spectator to infer the flow of everyday life, coupled with the database filmmaking that results in a lack of formulaic plot structures, is a further form of MacDougall's 'deep reflexivity' (see Chapter Three), in which the etic and emic overtly and ambiguously blend.

This reflexivity is reinforced by the visual designation of fragments (figure 57), which exposes the deliberate 'structuring structure' of the narrative habitus. Manovich (2007, p. 57) calls this narrative layer, 'meta-text' – it embodies the database by mediating to the spectator the filmmaker's experience of a banal, mechanical cataloguing of selected fragments. Both *66 Scenes* and *Thirty-two Short Films* use meta-text to catalogue their fragments, the former through Leth's voice and the latter through the use of white text on a black background. The reason for choosing Girard's aesthetic is because white, generic text on black is an ordinary cataloguing strategy used in film assemblies, where scenes to be used are collated in the timeline and temporarily consigned simple captions by the editor to facilitate quick identification and ordering. Using this banal and frugal aesthetic method in the final film (usually, these captions are removed in the rough-cut stage) mediates

a sense of ‘work-in-progress’ or an inchoate bricolage, key attributes of the ordinary everyday (Stewart, 2007; Ferguson, 2009; Highmore, 2011).



Figure 57: The titling of fragments

This meta-textual titling technique is also reminiscent of a diary or field journal of my pre-filmic encounters. Ferguson (2009, p. 164) observes that the diary is the literary form of everydayness. The (seemingly) disordered positioning of events turn the diary into a recording device that “eschews meaning, explanation, intention and self-hood”, and the chronological “sequence of days provides a semblance of order in a world made incoherent by the non-identical and incomprehensible” events of everyday life (p. 165). This resembles the chronology of the spectator’s viewing experience, which is guided by the meta-text that provides a semblance of order in the fragmented mosaic of Terry’s and June’s everyday lives. The ambiguous overlapping of formal guiding, bracketing and emic-

embodied experience reflects Henri Lefebvre's (2004, p. 9) notion of the rhythm of everyday life as a synergy between "rational, numerical, quantitative and qualitative rhythms" (dictated, for example, by clock time, calendar time, language and social conventions) and the "natural rhythms of the body" (for example, respiration, thirst, energy, fatigue, dexterity).

However, these title inserts also counteract the formation of visual, aural, metaphorical or temporal links<sup>73</sup> between episodes, which shifts the spectator's focus away from formalist plot structures towards experiencing the moment of the fragment. Overall, this slows down the time experienced by the viewer, approximating to Kilborn and Izod's (1997) notion of 'dead time'. Time appears to slowly unfold in real time within the individual episodes, especially in the still-life episodes discussed in the previous chapter, while the distinguishing titles completely lack pro-filmic time, making the audience temporarily aware of viewing time or 'filmmaking time'. The viscous, enervated time of the everyday that Bakhtin (1981) describes is elevated from its usual place in the background to occupy the foreground, and conversely, any dramatic, event-laden time is relegated to oblivion.

Dividing the narrative into discrete episodes also resembles the way we process the everyday on a neurocognitive level. Making sense of the fluctuating and overabundant flow of everyday life requires the separation of longer activities into small segments that are specific and defined yet remain part of a longer sequential flow (Tversky *et al.*, 2008, p. 436). This 'event segmentation' operates through the cognitive recognition of event boundaries, which are "points of perceptual and conceptual changes" that bracket events of relative stability (Swallow *et al.*, 2009, p. 236). In my films, this stability is accomplished by ensuring, editorially, that most episodes are coherent in space, time, film style and general theme; 'themes' in this context are not abstract ideas, but are literally embodied through objects or words, and identified by literal titles (see figures 55-57, above).

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<sup>73</sup> Bordwell calls these links 'scene hooks' and establishes an elaborate taxonomy for mainstream films (see: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/hook.php>). Having been alerted to them, I deliberately chose to avoid any scene hooks.

### *Juxtaposing episodes*

According to the model of ‘event segmentation’, however, emulating everyday cognitive perception requires not only coherence within the individual episodes, but the juxtaposition of disparate episodes. The paradoxical aim is to use systematic principles to mediate a “Brownian motion of everyday life; a chaotic jumble of fragmented and free improvisation” (Ferguson, 2009, p. 183). Thus, the chaotic and stochastic nature of the everyday can be mediated by creating contrast between episodes and avoiding cause-effect links. Creating contrast, of course, runs the risk of suggesting binary opposites, resulting in an intellectual, Soviet-style montage that elicits abstract ideas or infers plot developments. However, reducing the amount of common denominators also reduces the possibility of blending (see the discussion on conceptual blending in Chapter Five). In other words, if neighbouring episodes differ on many various levels, such as length, theme, character’s clothing, weather, film aesthetics, rhythm or mood, the juxtaposition will embody randomness rather than elicit dialectical meaning. This effect is further aided by the title inserts, which disrupt temporal and aesthetic links.

One example of this can be found in the still-life scene<sup>74</sup> in Terry’s film, which is followed by the scene in the writers’ club, which takes place at night and starts with Terry being driven to the meeting<sup>75</sup> (figure 58). The still-life sequence is composed of static shots of objects during daytime. Due to the cluttered shots that mediate Terry’s resentment of the lack of space in his small flat, the mood is neutral, even sombre. Still-life shots punctuate the significance of ordinary life by temporarily suspending the everyday flow, resulting in a ‘glitch’ in the unity of the practices and spaces in which we are currently immersed (Stewart, 2007, p. 19). This literal ‘dead time’ potentially triggers divergent reflections in the spectator, such as speculation about the objects in the scene or absent characters, self-reflection, symbolic interpretation, metaphorical associations, anticipation of future scenes or recollection of past ones. It represents a spectatorial space in which to experience and ponder. By contrast, the writers’ club scene is a highly dynamic and

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<sup>74</sup> Scene: ‘Still Life’ – 13:00

<sup>75</sup> Scene: ‘Writer’s Club’ – 15:22

verbally busy one, involving a range of bodies and idiolects, and a positive mood, due to the constant humorous interchanges. The audience collectively experiences the characters' conversations without being given time to reflect or interpret. In addition, the filmic style contrasts the obviously hand-held shots in this scene with the static tripod shots in the previous one. Further contrasts include the time of day, the difference in the domestic spaces and the themes – non-material literary stories as opposed to domestic materiality. The juxtaposition between these two episodes is an embodiment of the everyday fluctuation between flow and arrest (Stewart, 2007, p. 19), and even if the spectator does make associative links, the experiential foundation rests primarily in the mediated ordinariness embodied through contrast and the lack of causal progression.

**Scene: 'Still Life'**



**Scene: 'Writers' Club 1'**



**Figure 58: Juxtaposing Terry's episodes**

Juxtaposing different film aesthetics inherently involves the juxtaposition of different epistemologies and ontologies. For example, in June's film, the scene with the piece of marble<sup>76</sup> is followed by a montage of newspaper shots about June's

<sup>76</sup> Scene: 'The Marble Stone' – 32:29

public persona<sup>77</sup> and by the final wall scene<sup>78</sup> (figure 59). Of course, these scenes have different themes, different spaces (indoors – virtual – outdoors) and no tangible causal links, but added to this, the modes of audience address also vary significantly. The first scene is essentially an interview, in which June directly addresses the filmmaker and the spectator – June is the interlocutor. The second scene is an archive montage in which the filmmaker directly addresses the spectator – June is a pictorial representation. The third scene is an observational one, in which the filmmaker is backgrounded and June is given space to speak and to perform everyday activities – June is a social<sup>79</sup> actor.

**Scene: ‘The Marble Stone’**



**Scene: ‘Public Figure’**



**Scene: ‘The Wall 4’**



**Figure 59: Juxtaposing June’s episodes**

The oscillation between different documentary modes of address reflects the uniqueness of each moment and the frequent randomness and contingent nature of the everyday; the audience does not know what mode of address comes next. In addition, it counteracts the coherence of potential folk-psychological plot

<sup>77</sup> Scene: ‘Public Figure’ – 36:11

<sup>78</sup> Scene: ‘The Wall 4’ – 36:46

<sup>79</sup> The term ‘social’ is here extended to include the actuality of material interaction in relation to the concept of objectification.

trajectories and the formation of generic documentary modes. These generic modes, as described by Nichols (2001), Ward (2005) and Bondebjerg (2014), rely on the spectator's deployment of film-textual schemas to make coherent sense of the documentary. The constant change in modes of address prevents or reconfigures schematic cognition, and this is potentially conducive to reconfiguring blindness stereotypes. This hypothesis is supported by the episodic structure itself. Narrative comprehension relies on the activation of two types of past knowledge structures: 'generic knowledge' and 'episodic knowledge' (Grasser *et al.*, 2002, p. 244). Generic knowledge is based on schematic scripts and stereotypes, both of which are informed by the past consumption of folk-psychological narratives, while episodic knowledge is based on individual episodes experienced in the past at a particular time and place. Hence, a narrative made up of unique, momentary experiences, without a generic plot structure, activates episodic knowledge and impedes the activation of generic knowledge. It also adds episodic knowledge devoid of stereotypes to the spectator's knowledge structure, and may inform how they view documentary films on the subject in the future.

### **6.3 The narrative bracket**

#### **6.3.1 The post-filmic beginning**

##### *The contract and the alter*

Film beginnings and endings are liminal points that bracket the narrative and viewing habitus. The beginning comprises the 'contract' the audience makes with the film; they 'agree' to work at parsing the plot exposition in order to acquire knowledge about the traits, qualities and interrelationships of the screen characters (Smith, 2003, p. 144). This activity of parsing involves comparing filmic cues with in-built cognitive schemas (Bondebjerg, 1994, p. 75), which provide a frame of reference against which later developments can be measured (Bordwell, 1989b, pp. 189–190). Since the narrative beginning primes spectatorship and interacts with

the spectatorial dispositions explored in Chapter Four, it is here where the establishment of everydayness, emic experience and alterity needs to take place.

Both films start by introducing the characters' names: 'June' and 'Terry',<sup>80</sup> respectively. The names are the titles of the films and, at the same time, the titles of the first fragments. Because everyday experience is inherently fragmented, the name provides one of two unifying models that can be used to construct self-identity in everyday life (Ferguson, 2009, p. 80). The name does not just describe or signify us, it *is* us (p. 81), which is the reason why some of the fragments repeat the characters' names throughout the films; even if the audience fails to remember them, the aim is not retention but the initial mediation of particularity, and thus alterity.

The title is followed by a shot that reveals the main character's body and the space where the first post-filmic encounter occurs: June's book presentation (figure 60) and Terry being guided by Pam to imagine the painting she is describing (figure 61). Besides the name, the body is the second form of unity that constructs self-identity in everyday life (Ferguson, 2009, p. 80). The body constitutes a unity and reality of its own, providing a counterpoint to the fragmentary flux and arbitrariness of the everyday (p. 93).<sup>81</sup> Soon, shots of faces and hands follow; these are major constituents of Smith's (1994) first level of character engagement, 'recognition' (see Chapter Five), mediating the embodied particularity of both characters. In order to not overemphasise their eyes and thus their disability, the facial shots are medium close-ups, but the material interaction of their hands soon establishes their blindness beyond doubt. Experiencing the body, hands and especially the face constitutes the embodied encounter of the spectator with the alter – an alter who can never be fully grasped by the sighted audience. This encounter, in Levinas' (1989) terms, 'indebts' the audience with a certain ethical responsibility, one that may encourage critical questioning in terms of narrative and aesthetic representation, which would not be the case if body and space were abstracted.

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<sup>80</sup> I have decided to use only first names (instead of full names) in order to establish in the audience a more informal and personal first impression of the characters.

<sup>81</sup> Ferguson (2009, p. 93) clarifies that while the body provides a natural unity for self-identity, this does not imply that it is not subject to historical change; rather, that its 'unity' is unaffected by such change.



Figure 60: Book presentation



Figure 61: Pam describing a painting to Terry

### *Character exposition*

Both scenes set up the characters' major passions, writing and painting, and they establish their partners as supportive companions. Although their blindness is clearly established, it does not provide the impetus for a plot trajectory, and it is neither aesthetically nor thematically 'spectalised', nor is it normalised in relation to ableist norms; it is simply introduced as an emically ordinary, inherent trait of each characters' body, which interacts with space, objects and other subjects. June moves with relative ease through the spacious, public environment of the art gallery. She is not overly dependent on her partner, David, and she speaks to the audience. This establishes June's public persona and her comfortable spatial grip of non-domestic spaces, as mediated in other scenes. Terry, by contrast, is presented as firmly anchored to his small domestic space; he never appears in a public space, and he does not interact with the general public, a trait that is seen throughout the film. Both scenes also mediate the characters' relationship with their blindness. In the scene in which June's presents her book, her disability is peripheral, almost incidental, because June mainly experiences it as such. In the painting-description scene, Terry's disability is more apparent, particularly as he is often conscious of it, especially when it inhibits him.

Thus, character exposition in both beginning scenes is emically experiential, not informational. For instance, June's comprehensive and deliberate exposition of her life post-filmically mediates her somewhat ambiguous personality – overly formal, yet open, approachable and willing to reveal personal information, characteristics that also emerge in other scenes. This post-filmic choice of showing June eagerly talking about herself matches my pre-filmic experience of spending time with her, while Terry, on the other hand, tended to avoid speaking about his personal life, resulting in very laconic on-camera responses. Consequently, I decided to post-filmically omit these responses in several scenes (especially in his interview scene), as they would not mediate his persona. Hence, in the beginning scene of his film, Terry does not talk much, and the scene makes no reference to his personal life.

Moreover, as they omit the wider context, both scenes start and end *in medias res* and do not provide any premise or 'inciting incident' for a potential plot journey. Even if June's scene includes an overabundance of informational exposition during her speech, that speech is directed pre-filmically to the audience at her book presentation, and mediates June's agility as a public speaker. In addition, the information she provides is incomplete and serves no apparent narrative purpose other than revealing her career as a teacher, trainer and disability consultant, which has no particular plot function in the film. It does, however, prime the spectator to perceive her not as an old, insignificant woman, who spends time in her garden, walking through Harwich or doing mundane tasks, but as a VIP in her local community, as well as in the disability legislation community. Unfortunately, due to confidentiality, I was not able to film her giving legal advice or consultancy, and due to her age, she has largely stopped giving disability-awareness training. Thus, the exposition of these facts adds to her alterity, especially since these successful, public identities seem incongruent with the 'homely' identity mediated throughout the film.

### *Spectator dispositions*

The intertextual dimension of the contract between documentary and spectator addresses spectator dispositions in relation to schematic expectations and comparisons with other films or cultural products (Bondebjerg, 1994, p. 28). Bearing in mind the need to avoid the stereotypical portrayals outlined in Chapter Four, my narrative beginning does not fulfil the viewer's schematic expectations about films depicting blind people, and this will probably result in an initial clash between the narrative habitus and that of the viewer. However, the viewer's habitus is likely to be reconfigured in the first five-to-ten minutes once he/she recognises the fragmented, non-plot-driven, ambiguous narrative structure as the film's *modus operandi*. This potentially results in an initial self-reflexive experience; the viewer becomes aware of their own schematic viewing habitus and the necessity to reconfigure it.

This 'political reflexivity' relates to unexpected modes of representation. Nichols (2001, p. 130) elaborates that political reflexivity provokes awareness of the representation of social organisation and the assumptions that support it, framing localised experience with a wider socio-cultural experience and incorporating the spectator as a reflective social actor. This (temporary) socio-cultural awareness, reinforced by the inconsistency in stereotypical representation, may even prompt the audience to question and reconfigure ossified stereotypes. However, since my films aim not to *subvert* but rather to *transcend* stereotypes, the political reflexivity is bound to give way to Mac Dougall's deep reflexivity once the contract between film and audience is established and the film form remains consistent in its pursuit of mediating emic experience.

### **6.3.2 The post-filmic ending**

#### *Openness and ambiguity*

Like beginnings, endings are a threshold between the spectator's viewing habitus and his/her ordinary habitus. Folk-psychological narratives make this sense of liminality as smooth as possible by tightly and plausibly integrating their endings into the overall plot structure, offering formal, thematic and diegetic closure (Brylla, 2004). Since an episodic narrative does not complete or conclude any character journey or argument, its ending is formally abrupt and ambiguous because it stands in competition with numerous other internal episode endings (Christen, 2002, p. 50). *66 Scenes* and *Thirty-two Short Films* aim to compensate for this ambiguity by clearly signposting their endings through aesthetically and thematically paralleling the beginning fragment in terms of aesthetics, address and theme (American iconicity and Gould's reclusive character, respectively) (figure 62).

**66 Scenes from America (1982) – American iconicity**



**Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould (1994) – Gould, the recluse**



**Figure 62: Beginning and ending in *66 Scenes* and *Thirty Two Short Films***

However, my aim is to avert a comfortable transition between viewing and ordinary real-life habitus by deliberately leaving the ending as open as possible, as open narratives “celebrate the uncertainty of knowledge and the contingency and incompleteness of real life” (Neupert, 1995, p. 80). Thus, the experience of alterity and of everydayness may overlap with the spectator’s own everydayness. It is as if the apparent lack of an ending fails to end the contract established at the beginning and prompts the expectation of further episodes beyond the ending, fostering the consolidation of episodic, instead of generic, knowledge. The deflection of generic knowledge is also due to the fact that an abrupt, ambiguous ending does not fulfil the expectation of a conventional film closure. The spectator therefore is likely to experience a second moment of political reflexivity, triggering a critical socio-cultural awareness that may lead to a reconfiguration of stereotypes that will retain its impact beyond the artefactual ending. After all, open endings result in the spectator’s narrative comprehension process continuing beyond the film’s viewing, in order to complete the interpretation of the narrative events (Neupert, 1995, pp. 180–181).

### *The endings*

Terry's final scene portrays one of his regular cigarette breaks<sup>82</sup> (figure 63). He smokes, talks to Pam about how smoking helps reduce his stress, and finally gets up to wash his hands. This scene again captures Terry's bodily experience and affordance in relation to space, showing him sitting in his favourite position and favourite spot, and filming him crossing the living room to reach the kitchen.



**Figure 63: Scene: 'Fag Break 3'**

This last scene ends suddenly in the middle of Terry most likely going to wash his hands (the action ends before it properly begins). This abruptness is reinforced by Pam turning her head towards Terry immediately before the final cut to black. In terms of continuity editing and frontality, when a character turns her head, especially if that results in the character turning her back to the camera, this primes the viewer to expect a succeeding shot matching her eye line, or at least providing a vantage point that underlines what she is looking at (in editing terms, the turn of the head and the expected cut to a point-of-view shot is referred to as a 'beat'). Thus, it ambivalently competes with the numerous other scene endings that also occurred *in medias res*. It is an ordinary ending within the overall narrative habitus, but it is extraordinary because it is the narrative's ultimate ending. It resembles most of the other scene endings, and this *modus operandi* has established a narrative schema that conditions the spectator to expect yet another narrative fragment after this scene's ending; however, no other scene comes.

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<sup>82</sup> Scene: 'Fag Break 3' – 45:57

Instead of seeing the usual intertitle for the next scene after a short break of black screen, the audience sees the closing credits. The fact that this ending randomly happens to be the ending of the *final* scene establishes its difference in terms of the spectator's experience; in that moment, he/she abruptly crosses a space of liminality.

June's final scene shows her putting away the dishes<sup>83</sup> (figure 64). As in Terry's case, this scene captures her bodily experience in relation to her space, and depicts an everyday routine/ritual that is stimulating for her as it involves bodily movement, touch and the perception of the rhythmic sounds of crockery and cutlery being stowed away, all of which produce a sensorial concert for June and the spectator. These diverse interactions with household items of different materials, affordances and sounds mediates one last time June's strong anchoring to her quiet home in Harwich, which is paralleled by the lack of external, urban noise. It serves also as a reference to June's earlier poem about enjoying the silence and 'owning' the most mundane household sounds (in the 'From London to Harwich' scene). It is also revealing that this last scene shows her in her home and has no indication of whether she will move on or move away, work outside Harwich or travel. As June writes in her autobiography, *Beginning at the End (My Harwich Patchwork)*, Harwich is the place where she hopes to spend the 'autumn of her life'.



Figure 64: Scene: 'Dishes'

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<sup>83</sup> Scene: 'Dishes' – 42:55

The scene ends as she is putting away the cutlery, creating the same sense of open-endedness, suddenness and ambiguity described in Terry's case. However, putting away the dishes appears more mundane than Terry smoking, and it is certainly a task the majority of viewers could relate to. Thus, June's final scene represents perhaps the most ordinary task in her entire film, which makes the spectator's transition from the film-viewing habitus to his/her real-life habitus more permeable. It is a deliberate anti-climax that has neither any particular formal or thematic significance, nor does it reveal any interesting facts about June.

In both films, the end scenes are deliberately devised in a way that avoids any of the formal, thematic or story cues that narrative formulas usually use to induce a sense of closure, such as doors closing, the characters walking away from the camera, sunsets, significant quotes, authorial address or emotional intensity.<sup>84</sup> In both cases, there is a general uncertainty about how the characters' lives will progress, especially since the fate of the wall and the painting (these two narrative motifs will be discussed later) are left as unresolved as other issues referred to, such as Terry and Pam moving to a bigger home. Furthermore, as Thomas Christen (2002, p. 50) explains, film narratives that focus on momentary experience (for example, situational comedies or episodic films) create closure by providing a focal end-point that provides some kind of extraordinary experience. In cognitive terms, the unsurpassable *extraordinariness* of the final scene enables the logical termination of the narrative contract and the transition back into the real world. In order to avoid this kind of climax, Terry's and June's endings are deliberately kept as ordinary as possible, leaving the more extraordinary scenes (for example, June's book presentation and Terry's writers' club meeting) in the middle of the narrative. Lastly, unlike in *66 Scenes* and *Thirty-two Short Films*, my endings are deliberately as disparate as possible to the beginnings, avoiding similarities, as well as binary differences. This lack of bracketing further deflects the audience's sense of closure and suggests the continuation of everyday flow from the viewing habitus into that of the real world.

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<sup>84</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of different formal and diegetic ending cues, see Christen (2002).

## 6.4 The cyclical event

### 6.4.1 Pre-filmic methods

#### *Everyday rituals*

Whereas the juxtaposition of consecutive narrative episodes mediates the contingent fluctuation of the everyday, the overall narrative also needs to mediate Bakhtin's notion of its cyclical repetitiveness. This aspect of the everyday reveals the mechanisms of Bourdieu's habitus, as its cyclical nature involves habits, routines and practices. Using the database-filmmaking approach, I filmed a plethora of cyclical activities, and in postproduction – my pre-filmic encounter with the database – it was necessary to discern activities that could be used as discrete narrative fragments to portray cyclicity and, at the same time, emic experience. The criterion was that fragments had to efficiently mediate everydayness and emic experience to a public audience. As with the choice of objects that are simultaneously utilised and possessed in Chapter Five, I found that the ambivalence between utilitarian and ritualistic activities fulfilled this criterion.

Anthropological philosopher Frits Staal (1979, p. 9) offers a good model for distinguishing between everyday routines, which are result-oriented, and rituals, which are process-oriented. Everyday routines allow for spontaneous improvisation (bricolage), whereas rituals strictly adhere to precise rules which govern their form. Although Staal's dichotomy does not consider the nuances of ordinary events (his notion of ritual predominantly relates to Vedic rituals), his model is helpful in discerning activities that are both utilitarian and ritualistic, and hence could be called 'everyday ritual'.<sup>85</sup> For example, June's regular trip to witness the arrival of the Stena Line ferry<sup>86</sup> (figure 65), with the goal of hearing it as it enters the estuary, is a regular, ordinary activity, but it is also a ritualistic experience for her, governed by specific rules – she always stands on almost the same spot on the same pier, even though Harwich offers other aural and visual vantage points. For June, it is simultaneously an ordinary moment, in which she spends time with David,

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<sup>85</sup> Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) extensively discusses 'everyday rituals' in terms of individualisation, creativity and practice.

<sup>86</sup> Scene: 'Stena Line 1' – 02:51

stimulates her aural sense and takes some physical exercise, and an *extraordinary* moment that provides her with an experiential pleasure within the moment that is not necessarily related to the results. It is a moment she eagerly anticipates.

Scene: 'Stena Line 1'



Scene: 'Pouring Whisky'



Figure 65: Everyday rituals

Another example is Terry pouring a whisky and then drinking it<sup>87</sup> (figure 65). Terry himself regards this activity as a ritual, since he performs it according to specific rules: it has to be night (after 7pm); it can only be one specific label; it has to be mixed with ice and ginger ale in a particular ratio; it has to be in a whisky glass; and he has to drink it sitting in the living room, facing his computer. All these self-imposed rules are independent of any symbolic meanings but they result in a degree of pleasurable self-absorption (Staal, 1979, p. 3) and resemble a performance. In rituals, the act of performing is the “deliberate, self-conscious ‘doing’” of an action while communicating it on multiple sensory levels (visual imagery, dramatic sounds and tactile stimulation, for example), rendering the action a demonstration that clearly distinguishes it from an ordinary routine (Bell, 1997, p. 160). Terry performs for himself, but being aware of the camera, he also

<sup>87</sup> Scene: 'Pouring Whiskey' – 31:02

performs for the audience. This may not be obvious in the moment, but his constant comments addressed to the filmmaker and the audience (as in his suggestion in the previous chapter of placing a camera in the toilet as a conceptual artwork) are a narrative motif that structures Terry's post-filmic persona, which is discussed later.

Another criterion for distinguishing everyday rituals from purely utilitarian routines is that rituals do not have conspicuous causes and do not fulfil basic, de-individualised needs (Staal, 1979; de Certeau, 1984; Bell, 1997). For example, Terry washing his hands and Terry smoking (figure 66) both appear to be mundane routines he follows after painting. However, washing fulfils the goal of removing dirt and thus being able to touch other things, whereas smoking is a hedonistic activity triggered by Terry's individual need to smoke in the same position after each painting session. Thus, it is only the smoking that efficiently mediates emic experience, since it is process-driven and satisfies a purely subjective need rather than fulfilling a basic one, which is why the smoking is shown in discrete fragments and as a narrative motif, whilst the hand-washing is incidental part of a painting scene.

**Terry washing hands**



**Scene: Fag Break 1**



**Figure 66: Routine vs. everyday ritual**

## 6.4.2 Post-filmic methods

### *Inferred cyclicity*

Although many of the narrative fragments represent cyclical everyday rituals, only a few are actually repeated, since the aim is to represent a character mosaic consisting of a variety of facets in the characters' everyday lives. However, although the method of narrative fragmentation is not sufficient to infer the cyclical nature of these one-off moments, especially if their uniqueness is highlighted, everyday repetitive and routinised knowledge becomes embodied through our body's interaction with everyday objects (Tilley, 2006, p. 64). Thus, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's corporeal schema (see Chapter Three), cyclicity can be inferred through the emphasis on embodied knowledge accumulated through the repetitive material interaction within a cyclical situation. A concrete example is the scene where June writes on her computer<sup>88</sup> (figure 67).



Figure 67: Scene: 'Writing'

This scene shows June's body or parts of her body through a variety of different shot sizes and angles – shots of her seated comfortably in the chair in her

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<sup>88</sup> Scene: 'Writing' – 18:23

office, with her fingers moving swiftly over the keyboard and her facial expressions revealing her reactions. This mediates her skilful grip on the material environment; she is comfortably geared towards the task at hand. This bodily know-how is reinforced by omitting shots of the computer screen until the end of the scene, when the screen is shown switched off. Like June, the audience experiences the interaction with the computer only through the tactility of her fingers; the aural, robotic feedback of the screen-reading software; June's facially expressive feedback; and her relaxed body. The ocular-centric expectation of a cut from June's reaction shot to her point-of-view (POV) shot remains unsatisfied until the end, thus mediating embodied interaction through senses other than vision, and focusing on the routinised dexterity of her entire body. As a result of withholding the shot of the screen until the end, the audience may experience a certain political reflexivity, questioning conventional viewing and editing habits engendered by the reaction-POV-shot cluster. However, even if this does not take place, on a more basic spectatorship level, the typing, facial expressions and software voice that describes every key stroke result in the spatial inference of what happens on the computer screen as if the spectators themselves were writing.

The benefit of inferring cyclicity through the post-filmic emphasis of a corporeal schema is that pre-knowledge through narrative exposition is not necessary. Although the audience knows that June is a writer, because it was mentioned several times earlier, and although the scene literally starts *in medias res* in the story June is writing, implying that she was working on it before, the main mediator for routinisation is the bodily know-how. Hence, single, decontextualised scenes like Terry drinking whisky, Terry and Pam solving a crossword (in which know-how is mediated through their idiolects), and June making coffee and knitting (figure 68) are perceived as cyclical everyday rituals.

Scene: 'Pouring Whisky'



Scene: 'Crossword'



Scene: 'Making Coffee'



Scene: 'Knitting'



Figure 68: Single, cyclical scenes

### *The narrative motif*

Post-filmically, repeated everyday rituals become narrative motifs. Situation-focused motifs, such as Terry's painting process (figure 73), were selected from the pre-filmic database on the basis of their efficiency in mediating emic everyday experience and alterity through the ambivalence between utilitarian routine and experiential ritual mentioned earlier. Object-focused motifs, such as June's wall (figure 72), were selected on the basis that they not only mediate different and comparably ambiguous historicities, but also the ambivalence between used and possessed object, emphasising the audience's experience of alterity and objectification.

Narrative motifs provide the pleasure of 'cognitive play' (Plantinga, 2009a, p. 21). The recognition and processing of motifs is grounded in hard-wired perceptual-cognitive attributes that enable us to make sense of our environment by orientation that is based on the discovery of new information that fits into schematic patterns. The audio-visual discovery of a piece of information, person, object or space that refers to an earlier counterpart, and the potential recognition of a story or thematic significance in these references, represents a pleasurable

cognitive stimulation (p. 24). Thus, motifs embody accumulated spectatorial knowledge and the very historicity of the viewing habitus, in which momentary knowledge is added to the accumulation of past knowledge.

Motifs are important for episodic narratives that do not follow conventional plots. According to Peter Wuss (2009, pp. 70–79), these films use ‘topic lines’ based on the repetition and variation of aesthetically or thematically similar structures, encouraging the viewer to develop latent expectations about certain configurations of stimuli – a necessary prerequisite for narrative coherence in episodic films. In my films, this latent narrative coherence acts as a natural emic glue, which offsets the etic, meta-textual titles, and reinforces the temporal gestalt of the narrative habitus by compensating for the deliberate lack of links between consecutive episodes. This enhances the viewing habitus of a public audience. However, in order to prevent the formation of links while still providing narrative coherence, all motifs are evenly distributed across the narrative and are at least two episodes apart. This natural distribution reinforces the ordinariness of cyclical events by allowing them to sporadically emerge and disappear from the everyday flow, seemingly at random. This strategy is especially important for Terry’s painting process, as an overemphasis on a blind person painting could easily slip into spectacle; by rendering this everyday ritual ordinary it becomes simply another facet in Terry’s everyday life.

Three types of narrative motifs can be distinguished as either repetitive, transformative or teleological.<sup>89</sup> Repetitive motifs depict an event that recurs without an implied chronology or progression; transformative motifs depict a significant development in the character’s life that is not goal-driven, but is, rather, affected by external circumstances; and teleological motifs depict goal-driven developments, in which characters strive to achieve a material or immaterial goal. The intertwining of different motif strands that mediate momentary or longitudinal experiences (or both) reflects the variety of differing rhythms and patterns inherent

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<sup>89</sup> These motif types are loosely based on Grodal’s (1999, p. 61ff) three modes of high-level human arousal, which he applies to the spectatorial engagement with screen characters in relation to their actions within the narrative: telic mode (goal-oriented actions), paratelic mode (non-goal-oriented actions) and autonomic mode (reaction to external circumstances).

in everyday life (Lefebvre, 2004; Stewart, 2007; Highmore, 2011). Of course, these three types of motif can appear in conjunction or even overlap, but distinguishing them conceptually sheds light on spectatorship.

*The repetitive motif – contrast*

The repetitive motif of both June’s Stena Line scenes<sup>90 91</sup> (figures 69 and 70) is neither developmental nor does it reveal the temporal order or frequency of, or the gaps between, the events. However, it constitutes an important everyday ritual that is repetitive yet unique in its momentary experience, an inherent ambivalence of the everyday (Ferguson, 2009; Highmore, 2011). The uniqueness of the moment is primarily achieved through aesthetic contrast, which emerges from the seasonal difference of summer versus winter, as manifest in the colours, textures, clothing and body language. However, this contrast is enhanced by certain emotion markers, discussed in the previous chapter, that evoke the warm, tranquil mood in the summer scene and the cold, windy, harsher mood in the winter scene.



Figure 69: Scene: ‘Stena Line 1’

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<sup>90</sup> Scene: ‘Stena Line 1’ – 02:51

<sup>91</sup> Scene: ‘Stena Line 2’ – 31:06



Figure 70: Scene: 'Stena Line 2'

However, the contrast can also be seen in the way the film style renders June's perception of the ferry, and in authorial reflexivity. In the summer scene, a long static take and deliberate camera framing ensures that a long time passes between the moment the audience sees June and David on the pier, looking in the direction of the ferry, and the moment the ferry actually enters the frame and the audience sees and hears it – which is also the moment June hears it for the first time. This technique transposes June's emic experience onto the audience by focusing on her perspective, rather than reproducing that of a sighted person. Clearly, David sees and comments on the ferry long before it can be heard, but the spectator is deliberately denied his ocular-centric point of view, which could potentially trigger a sense of authorial reflexivity, since films usually offer vantage points of view. Conversely, the winter scene uses the conventional reaction-shot-POV-shot cluster, which enables the spectator to see the ferry before June hears it. The spectator's schematic expectations in terms of film style are satisfied, and thus the scene feels less reflexive.

June uses the pier in both scenes to get close to the ferry's trajectory, but in a later scene it also offers June a more direct pleasurable experience, when she and

David have a drink in the cafe on the pier<sup>92</sup> (figure 71). This pleasant experience is clearly mediated through reaction shots that reveal June's facial expressions as she hears the conversations and footsteps of people around her, and the sounds of the bobbing boats, the sea washing against the wooden pier beams, the seagulls and the wind. The pier serves as a material interface to a variety of sensory stimuli, which firmly anchors her to this object. However, as far as June is concerned, its identity is transient: the first time the audience sees the pier in the summer scene, it appears to be purely utilitarian; the second time, in the cafe scene, it becomes (in Baudrillard's terms) an object of possession in which June invests emotionally; and the third time, in the winter scene, it can be perceived as both utilitarian and an object June possesses emotionally. Similarly, the identity of June's dog, who appears twice in the film, is also transient. In this scene, the dog is in the background. As she is becoming bored and slightly restive, David takes her for a walk and removes her from the scene. In the last wall scene, however, when the dog enters the garden, she becomes the focus of attention in the foreground, pushing the wall motif further into the background. All these overlapping motifs are good examples of the complexity and transformative nature of everyday rhythms and narrative topic lines, which result in the constant renegotiation of material identities.

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<sup>92</sup> Scene: 'Coffee on the Pier' – 16:47

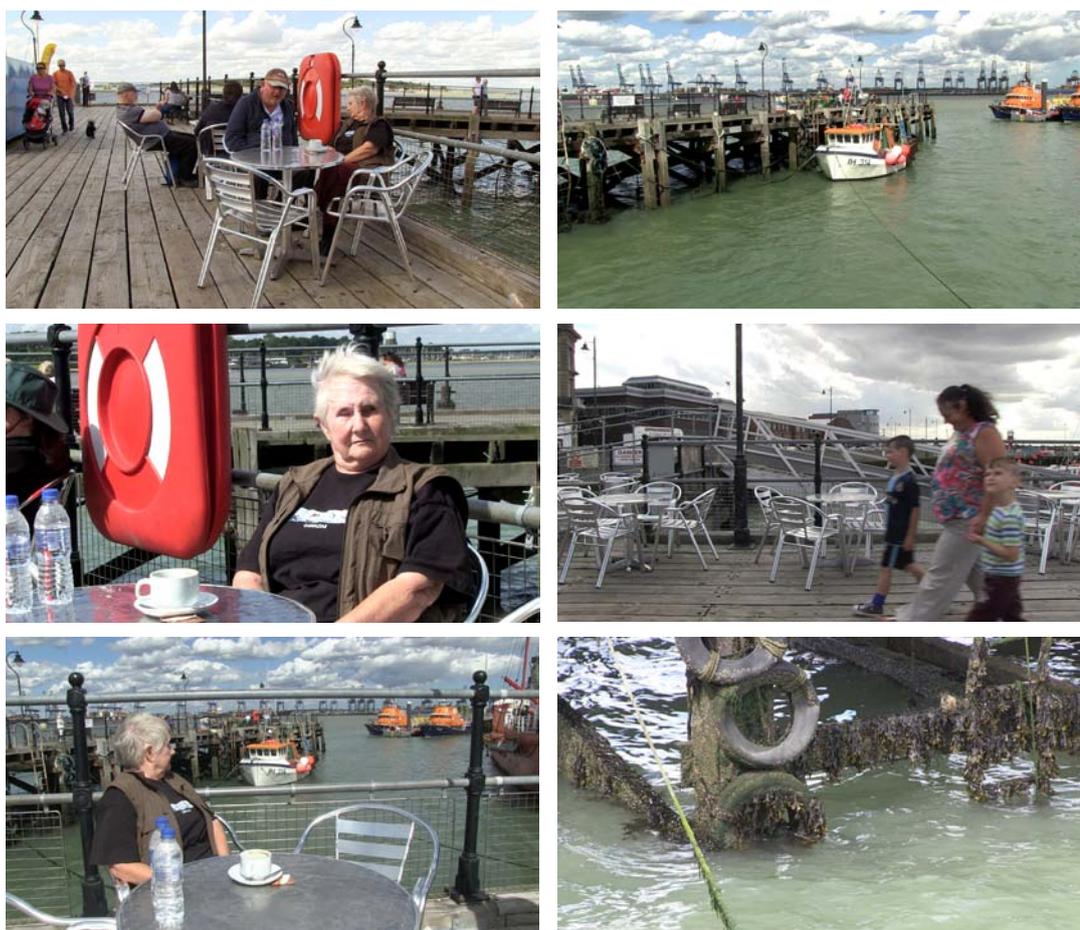


Figure 71: Scene: 'Coffee on the Pier'

*The transformative motif – historicity*

The transformative motif essentially mediates historicity. The wall, discussed in Chapter Five in terms of June's historicity, is a typical example (figure 72): it mediates a significant development in her life, embodied through its transient material dispositions and June's corresponding feelings and actions, but June does not actively pursue this development – that is, it is not teleological. Instead, it emerges through historical circumstances: June discovers the wall when she buys the house; the wall inspires her to write a short story; the wall deteriorates; June is in a financial position to have it rebuilt; the wall absorbs rain water that cause damp to spread indoors. This development clearly indicates a chronology, but it does not have a larger goal or seek a concrete result, especially not one set by June. Rather, she has to occasionally set mini-goals in reaction to these developments, such as rebuilding the wall or preventing the damp. However, the wall's historical

development has considerably transformed June's life, and this is manifested in the film through a shift from embodied interaction to embodied distance.

Scene: 'The Wall 1'



Scene: 'The Wall 2'



Scene: 'The Wall 3'



Scene: 'The Wall 4'



Figure 72: The wall – the transformative motif

In accordance with the notion of everydayness as incomplete and 'on-flowing', and of alterity as fragmentary, ambiguous and open-ended, the wall motif has no closure. Its fate in relation to the dampness it creates is as open as June's distance towards it. It remains uncertain as to whether the damp problem has been fixed, whether the wall has to be removed, or whether June has ceased to regard the wall as a friend and object of custodianship.

#### *The teleological painting motif – improvisation and failure*

Terry's painting process is the only teleological motif in the films (figure 73). In principle, each teleological motif element is unique as each element is a progressively transformed version of the previous one, focused on the final result envisaged by the character. However, plot trajectories have a tendency of shifting

the experiential focus from the moment to the actual progression and the goal, and are therefore prone to schematising the character.

**Scene: 'Painting 1' – rolling plasticine**



**Scene: 'Painting 2' – signature**



**Scene: 'Painting 3' – applying plasticine**



**Scene: 'Painting 4' – texture and hair**



**Scene: 'Painting 5' – applying paint**



**Figure 73: The painting process – the teleological motif**

In order to deflect attention from the finished painting and the process, the post-filmic emphasis was placed on Terry's embodied bricolage approach of improvisations and failures, moments that would usually be excluded in documentary narratives. Embodied knowledge, the habitus of people who engage in manual labour, is mostly acquired by trial and error (Dant, 2004, p. 43). Several moments reveal Terry's embodied knowledge, acquired through his past

experiences of trial and error, such as when he creates the moon<sup>93</sup> (figure 74): he first places a chunk of hard plasticine between his thigh and his calf to warm it up and make it malleable; he keeps checking it – all the while, working on another piece of plasticine – until he thinks it is ready; he then uses a plastic cup to form the moon, which he sticks onto the canvas. These seemingly peripheral and incidental moments of material interaction do not significantly advance the painting process but are essential to mediate Terry’s implicit co-ordination of what he perceives and how he responds. Perception and action are the major mechanisms for sedimented corporeal knowledge, which disposes the agent to respond in ordinary ways to ordinary situations (Crossley, 2001, p. 110). These ordinary reactions are improvisations consolidated through trial and error, such as when Terry uses his own body and everyday objects as tools, a particular configuration that mediates his unique material interaction with the moon.



Figure 74: Creating the moon

A major element of bricolage and the everyday, bestowing the moment with a unique quality and counteracting the formation of schematic characters, is the randomness of failure. The everyday is interspersed with disjunctures, disruptions,

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<sup>93</sup> Scene: 'Painting 3' – 19:22

interferences and the work of repair, which reveal its elasticity (Trentmann, 2009, p. 69). Embodied knowledge has to be readjusted in the moment in order to deal with sudden disruptions and failures, and this leads either to a bricolage approach of repair or to a suspension of the task. These unexpected moments highlight the uniqueness of the moments and the alterity of the body, since the body needs to temporarily deviate from its usual schema.

Also, repair or suspension result in time appearing more viscous and devoid of energy, as Bakhtin puts it, thus mediating everyday time. For example, Terry complains several times about the plasticine being too warm and soft (revealing the time of the year when these scenes were shot), and in several instances, he struggles to separate the sticky plasticine stripes from one another, and it sticks to his fingers instead of the canvas or he finds it difficult to mould it properly<sup>94 95</sup> (figure 75). All these moments stretch time by forcing Terry to repeat unsuccessful attempts, culminating in one instance where he has to abort the process, which is taken, post-filmically, as a cue to end the scene. This narrative disruption, which leaves the scene *in medias res*, is this time induced by Terry himself.



Figure 75: Sticky plasticine

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<sup>94</sup> Scene: 'Painting 3' – 19:22

<sup>95</sup> Scene: 'Painting 4' – 33:25

Documentaries often tend to exclude disruptions and failures, concerned that it could either undermine the characters or create moments of dead time that disrupt the flow and structure of the plot trajectories. My films, by contrast, celebrate failure as an essential attribute of everydayness and alterity, portraying non-schematic, complex characters, precisely *because* it slows time down and focuses the spectator's experience of momentary material interactions and the agency of spaces and objects.

Unexpected failures, disruptions and repeatedly unsuccessful attempts occur in several other scenes, such as June's book presentation.<sup>96</sup> Only two guests are present, but the fact that many more were expected is indicated by the empty chairs, the guests' distance to June's table and the numerous empty cups and glasses (figure 76). In a different scene, the dog interrupts her explanation of how the wall causes damp in the house by running into the scene and jumping on her lap<sup>97</sup> (figure 77). Apart from the plasticine-related disruptions, Terry's film depicts these types of moments in the scenes when Pam, for example, repeatedly and perhaps unsuccessfully tries to describe an illustration of a painting to Terry ('Terry'), when I interrupt him to ask him to turn the music off before he starts preparing the painting ('Painting 1'), and when he twice attempts to light his cigarette ('Fag Break 1'). Thus, the topic lines of improvisations, disruptions and failures become repetitive motifs in themselves.

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<sup>96</sup> Scene: 'June' – 00:04

<sup>97</sup> Scene: 'The Wall 4' – 36:46



Figure 76: Book presentation



Figure 77: The dog interrupts June

Another strategy for preventing the painting process from turning into a formulaic plot, instead mediating ordinariness and alterity, is the omission of context. Although the scene starts near the beginning of the actual painting process, it is not clear why or for whom Terry is painting this picture, nor what it will depict. Thus, like a longitudinal fragment, it starts and also finishes *in medias res*. The spectator never sees the finished painting, so it is uncertain whether Terry completes it or where it will end up – the still-life sequence of Terry’s home shows paintings hung on the walls but also stowed away in corners and even dumped in the garden. Any of these locations could represent its ultimate fate.

In addition, since the painting process has not ended, there is no implication of a character journey – that is, whether Terry feels satisfaction (heroic success) or frustration (tragic failure) at the end result. As painting is part of his everyday, Terry would most likely feel neither, which was the case for the picture he painted for my filming in 2004. However, due to folk-psychological thinking patterns, if the spectator sees the finished painting, he/she is likely to project these emotions onto Terry. The open-ended teleological painting motif thus frustrates the spectator on several levels, especially since they expect an end-product. At the most, the paintings seen hanging in Terry's home during the film and the last painting scene give a certain hint about the visual quality of the finished painting. Withholding a glimpse of the final painting may have an additional advantage in terms of spectatorship: the spectator is exempt from making an aesthetic judgement about the painting, potentially escaping the uncomfortable dilemma of having to decide on a benchmark of quality and likeability which will inevitably be informed by the fact that Terry is blind. This reflects Terry's own attitude towards his paintings: he mentions in parts of his interview not included in the film (mainly in order not to overemphasise painting as a predominant narrative theme) that he does not regard them as aesthetic objects but as ordinary things he creates without the necessity (and ability) to visually judge them. Hence, his comment about throwing away paintings that do not 'behave' ('Fag Break 1') relates purely to his tactile interactions with them during the creation process, not the visual aesthetics of the end product.

Overall, the painting process is subsumed by the everyday flow as randomly as it emerged, and this is underlined by the fact that the painting scenes are not used as beginning and end scenes. It is important that the painting process is not seen as a metonymy for Terry's persona. It is only one facet in his life, and although it *is* his passion, it is as much part of the everyday and his alterity as his whisky ritual. Thus, even though I had enough material to edit eight painting scenes, I chose not to suffuse the narrative with this motif.

Linked to the painting motif is the repetitive 'fag-break' motif (figure 78) that occurs after three painting scenes, a good example of the intertwining and

interaction between disparate everyday rhythms, topic lines and types of motifs (teleological and repetitive). The fag-break scenes are the only fragments that are chronologically linked to their preceding painting fragments; the audience knows that Terry smokes a cigarette after each painting session in order to relax. As mentioned earlier, the fag break is a ritual because it serves Terry's subjective needs and is performed in the same spot after each painting session. For this reason, it needs to be framed by the larger painting motif, turning it into a hybrid between a repetitive ritual and a unique moment in a larger development.

**Scene: 'Fag Break 1'**



**Scene: 'Fag Break 2'**



**Scene: 'Fag Break 3'**



**Figure 78: Fag break – the repetitive motif**

*The transformative filmmaking motif – clashing habitus*

The filmmaking motif in Terry's film is a further example of a transformative motif, since the filmmaking constitutes external circumstances that transform Terry. It results in the filmmaker's habitus meshing with that of the character's, revealing the ordinariness of both entities. Terry's numerous, random and unexpected references – some more subtle than others – to the filmmaking process are

deliberately edited into different episodes in order to create the filmmaking motif (figure 79, below, shows several examples).

**Scene: 'Painting 1': Terry complains about having to turn off background music**



**Scene: 'Writers' Club 1': Terry complains about having to constantly repeat actions**



**Scene: 'Fag Break 2': Terry bumps into the camera while smoking and comments about it**



**Scene: 'Conceptual Art': Terry suggests placing a recording camera in a toilet bowl**



**Scene: 'Terry Interview': Terry mentions why lack of music affects him**



**Scene: 'Painting 5': Terry comments on the sound of the wind chimes and editing**



**Figure 79: Filmmaking references – the transformative motif**

The first painting scene starts with Terry being asked to turn his music off because it affects the sound continuity in post-production.<sup>98</sup> As background music is part of his painting ritual, Terry challenges me to explain why, after which he reluctantly agrees. In this way, the audience is primed to expect that every painting

<sup>98</sup> Scene: 'Painting 1' – 03:34

scene will lack music, and to consider Terry's constant murmured asides and comments as an alternative auditory filler of the background 'silence'. As when the everyday time that Bakhtin designates to the narrative background is brought to the fore, so the auditory background is foregrounded. The continuity issue becomes a motif of its own, and Terry takes every opportunity to refer to it. For instance, in a later scene, the wind chimes suddenly tinkle, and Terry mischievously comments: "That's right, wind chimes, keep tinkling. I wonder how he's going to edit that one out."<sup>99</sup> In the writers' club, he complains about being constantly asked to repeat small actions in order to get the best coverage, and being told when to start and stop an action to help the continuity of the shoot.<sup>100</sup> In his interview, Terry laments the lack of background music, arguing that, being blind, the lack of music feels like being deaf, too.<sup>101</sup> Hence, sound and general continuity become reflexive narrative discourses that are at times embodied in the unique moment, and at other times a subject of retrospective reflection.

These topic lines embody the transformative clash between the filmmaker's habitus and Terry's habitus through addressing one of the most ordinary elements in both. For instance, Terry requires continuous background *music* in order to compensate for his blindness and his fragmented perception, and thus facilitate the creation of his painting, while I desire continuous background *silence* in order to compensate for the fragmented and elliptical nature of the film, facilitating the creation of my filmic scene as an illusory experience of actuality. The clash between Terry's habitus and mine transforms Terry by making him more apt to comment on the filmmaking process, and also transforms me as I continually react to these comments on camera and do not exclude my remarks from the edit. This transformative post-filmic experience closely resembles my pre-filmic experience with Terry in the filming and editing stage, and mediates the historicity of the filmmaking and the filmmaker to the spectator. As MacDougall (1998, p. 89) comments, "the author's position is neither uniform nor fixed, and expresses itself through a multileveled and constantly evolving relation with the subject".

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<sup>99</sup> Scene: 'Painting 5' – 43:02

<sup>100</sup> Scene: 'Writer's Club 1' – 15:22

<sup>101</sup> Scene: 'Terry Interview' – 35:36

Terry's evocation of the filmmaking motif also mediates everydayness. His random, unexpected comments on the filmmaking process, such as the camera-in-toilet-bowl art work or the wind chimes, mediate the uniqueness of the moment and make the flow of our respective everyday experiences highly permeable, as they are spatio-temporally directed towards ordinary materialities and corresponding situations in both his habitus and mine – the recording camera and microphone in mine; the tinkling wind chimes, CD player and toilet in his. In addition, Terry's comments constitute disruptions to the filmmaking habitus, which shows an apparent failure on my part to control the situation, despite the fact that they could be easily cut out of the final film. In return, my intervention, asking him turn off the music, disrupts his habitus and shows a failure on his part to control this aspect of his everyday life. These disruptions and failures reveal two different 'ordinarinesses' and 'alterities'.

The revelation of our respective habitus through disruption is most explicit in the scene where Terry bumps into the camera while smoking, making him drop his cigarette and forcing to search for it.<sup>102</sup> This literally embodied clash reveals both the camera and Terry's blindness, firstly because he did not see the camera, and secondly because he has to spend time finding the cigarette. When he finally finishes his cigarette, he reflexively announces, "putting-out time", knowing that I would want to film a close-up (figure 80). Instead of cutting, I let the camera move in real time from a medium shot of Terry to a close-up of his fingers while he is waiting, thus exposing the act of shot coverage for visual continuity. Finally, upon my request, Terry puts out his cigarette – by squeezing it instead of just letting it go out – and sardonically comments: "Strange, you're meant to enjoy a fag break, but here I am, being harassed ... I'll have to have a fag break for the stress of this fag break." When I apologise for imposing the filming process on his fag break, he quips: "Said with the sincerity of a cheap quiz-show host."

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<sup>102</sup> Scene: 'Fag Break 2' – 22:32



Figure 80: 'Putting-out time'

Pre-filmically, Terry's knowledge in terms of continuity filming is clearly accumulated through all our filming encounters. It reaches a synchronicity between our different habitus, whereby he offers to repeat an action in order for me to cover a different angle or, as in the smoking example, he waits until the camera is in position before he performs a particular action. The anticipation of filming practices, and the mischievous interactions with me on-camera, result in a peculiar love-hate relationship developing between Terry and the filmmaking process, which is best expressed in his acerbic remark at the writers' club meeting: "[Filming] doesn't bother me; just this damn continuity; he keeps on and on and on about it; stop, start, stop, start ... [M]oaning about editing and continuity, and editing and continuity." Ironically, as a motif, the continuity topic line contributes to narrative coherence by exposing the fractured nature of filming and editing.

The filmmaking motif of failures, disruptions and exposure of continuity rules also disrupts schemas in the audience's viewing habitus. After all, the audience expects to be implicitly subjected to continuity rules, not to learn about them reflexively. Thus, the filmmaking motif results in the clash between, and the post-filmic revelation of, Terry's everyday habitus, my filmmaking habitus and the audience's viewing habitus. In these moments, all three entities oscillate between Richardson's two modes of material being (referred to in Chapter Five): the implicit interaction with an object (painting/smoking, filming, watching) and the reflexive perception of that object as an artefact (the painting/cigarette, the camera, the film). These moments reflect the intersubjective intertwining of disparate everyday rhythms, moods and historicities. In the film, they are deeply reflexive as they naturally emerge from my interaction with Terry, but at the same time they are

politically reflexive as they deviate from schematic portrayals and turn the spectator into a conscious social actor who may be encouraged to question stereotypical modes of representation.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that I chose (as a politically reflexive comment) to use the song I asked Terry to turn off (Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No.1*) over the 'Still Life' scene,<sup>103</sup> which refers to my postproduction habitus where I have finally full control over the use of music. Naturally, the irony is that in the only scene in the film that features music, Terry's body is absent; from my etic perspective, only his objects are granted the privilege of interacting with the music. Further, I deliberately chose not to lay music over the painting scenes in post-production. Arguably, this would have been more true to the mediation of Terry's emic experience; however, that emic experience would have pretended a purely observational and non-interventional filmmaking approach, in which everyday life is constructed as if the camera were not present. With Terry, unlike June, the negotiation between my habitus and his is overt, since these disruptions to his everyday life have a profound impact, triggering all his comments and murmured asides. It would therefore be emically less justifiable to mix these with a musical overlay, and it would dilute his respective comments in the writers' club and interview scenes. Thus, the post-filmic omission of music, which is reinforced by the stark contrast of having music in the 'Still Life' scene, reflects Terry's emic experience in the moment of filming.

Interestingly, the filmmaking motif correlates with, or indeed triggers, the motif of Terry commenting on or enacting the inhibition of his blindness, which may be a consequence of his frustration at not being able to reciprocate the gaze of the filmmaker, the camera and the audience. It may also relate to the fact that, despite all his sarcastic remarks, he conscientiously tried to perform all the requested actions for the camera, which could have triggered a certain alienating consciousness about his motility and material interaction. As discussed in the previous chapter, the home is usually a place where the disabled body disappears from consciousness, but the filmmaking process may have made Terry aware of his

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<sup>103</sup> 13:00

body once again. The commenting-on-blindness motif is occasionally shown in the film, but it always emerges from the habitus clash and appears to be a performance for the camera (he never mentions it to Pam when they interact in the actuality scenes).

June, on the other hand, never openly commented pre-filmically about being inhibited by her blindness or, later, about being made aware of it by the filming process, or more generally in other situations. This may be due to the fact that she is used to being filmed and exposed to media as a result of her work, but also because of her familiarity with her home town and her corresponding corporeal agility in different public spaces. She has, in general, a more positive outlook on life with blindness than Terry, who is sometimes depressed about his lack of sight and his small flat, which makes him appear more cynical and reclusive.

Also, the filmmaking motif is largely absent in June's film. The collision between her habitus and mine was much more subtle than in Terry's case, as she made no unsolicited remarks about the filmmaking process. She regarded the filmmaking process as a professional endeavour that she naturally complied with in order to aid my project's objective of portraying the everyday life of blind people, and since this objective nominally did not involve filmic reflexivity, she did not expose the actual recording and editing process. Thus, a deliberate bracketing of the filmmaking process would have resulted in a purely etic experience and artificial, instead of deep, reflexivity. Comparing the formal structures of normative everyday behaviour to theatrical performances, Erving Goffman (1974, p. 558) argues that the representation of self in any situation constitutes a "lay dramatist's scenario employing himself as a character". Terry's scenario accords with his own playful framework, not a conventional documentary framework, while June behaved in full accordance with conventional documentary character scenarios. This makes her film appear more conventional, which in turn mediates her more mainstream life, while Terry's film mediates a more alternative and eccentric lifestyle.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Chapters Four, Five and Six have covered my practice through a wide range of case studies and methods. These chapters may therefore appear very dense, but this density is exactly what is needed to demonstrate the diverse ways of mediating the everyday and alterity. However, this density also provides an account of the multitude of complex decisions in film practice that inform spectatorship, which serves as a latent commentary on the importance of spectatorship not only in film practice but also in filmmaking textbooks and scholarly discourses. The three practice chapters are by no means exhaustive. Chapter Four could go on to discuss, if space allowed, more fundamental issues of disability representation, such as the difference between the ‘medical’ and ‘social’ models in analysing disability, and account for social practices, which would help draw a necessary boundary between medical films (strictly speaking, also documentaries) and artistic films. Chapters Five and Six could extend the discussion of both films to an analysis of performance, since both characters perform in their own ways for the camera – June in a more stiff and formal fashion, and Terry in a playful, somewhat narcissistic way. They could also expand on the ethical dimension of a sighted person filming blind characters (see Chapter Seven), which inevitably shapes Terry’s and June’s performance.

The limitations of space prevent a consideration of technical filmmaking choices and their impact on the audience, too. For example, my particular use of the Canon XF100 camera, which is light and compact, providing freedom of movement and reaction to spontaneous character actions, proved an efficient choice because its large depth of field visually anchors the screen body to the background space, facilitating the implementation of concepts such as intentional threads and objectification. Furthermore, the sound mixer made a conscious attempt to clean the sound to a level where it is clear yet still can be perceived as belonging to the visual materiality of the space, which involved the occasional addition of stock sound effects in order to materialise a space even further and/or mediate everyday sounds of a particular location and time of day – a strategy known as ‘sound sweetening’.

The three chapters also show that the methods used for both films are adaptable and near-replicable for other characters – even ones who are not blind. Thus, even though the films are part of a diptych, the methodology could continue to produce films *ad infinitum*. The choice of the number of films (two) is purely pragmatic, related to the workload and time frame of the thesis, but totally arbitrary in terms of the actual methodology. If the reader of this thesis feels a sense of arbitrariness in terms of the number of films, or even in the selection of the two characters, then my aim is achieved, since this proves that their blindness or disability as a narrative ingredient has become incidental – practically insignificant – and purely taxonomic; it is an inherent element within Terry’s and June’s ordinary lives, which, although visible, is hardly worth commenting on from a filmmaker’s and a spectator’s perspective. However, this sense of arbitrariness in terms of characters should not forfeit Terry’s and June’s particularity and alterity. The films, the methods and the spectatorial experience are highly particular, yet that particularity says absolutely nothing about why the reader of this thesis watches these particular films about these particular characters, and why it ends after two films. The experience is particular yet generic, an ambivalence that reflects the seemingly random ending of the films: the episodic fragments could continue *ad infinitum*, but, for practical reasons, they arbitrarily stop at a certain point, and that point is as insignificant as the previous fragments’ endings.

## Chapter Seven: Reflective Conclusions

### 7.1 Foundations

This thesis set out to explore the proposition that the application of spectatorship theories could help establish a documentary film practice that critically addresses spectatorship in relation to the filmmaking process, and particularly in relation to topics or people who are persistently portrayed in schematic ways that lead to the formation and perpetuation of stereotypes. The aim of both the written and practical components of the thesis was to design a methodology that positions my documentary practice in a socio-cultural context in relation to other film artefacts, enabling me to depart from traditional ways of representing blindness. This involved the reflexive deployment of two types of knowledge inherent to film practice: ‘technical knowledge’, which provides the competence to operate technical equipment and organise logistics, and ‘cultural knowledge’, which determines how technical knowledge is mobilised in certain ways, resulting in a cultural artefact that has far-reaching socio-cultural implications (Wayne, 1997, pp. 9–10).

Examining the tacit foundations of cultural knowledge in documentary filmmaking textbooks offered the dual benefit of shedding light on both the customary practices in the field and the spectatorial reception of the film text. The link between filmmaking and spectator practices can be found in the use of folk psychology, as encapsulated in Plantinga’s concept of the filmmaker-audience loop – folk psychology provides simple narrative strategies that engage the audience, ensuring the film’s wide and successful exposure. However, this is also its biggest drawback: the folk-psychological deployment of schematic and emotion-driven mechanisms carries the risk of stereotyping topics and people. In fact, the deconstruction and critique of folk-psychological filmmaking practices in this research was revelatory on a personal level, since I had previously capitalised on these practices in an unconscious and uncritical manner when making my other films, and taught them extensively on most of my courses.

## 7.2 The cognitive approach

As a scholar with a keen interest in spectatorship, it came as little surprise to find a major gap in the documentary studies texts, since the conflation of 'expression' and 'perception' has been a major issue in film studies in general. Finding spectatorship theories that prove rigorous enough to prevent this conflation, but flexible and pragmatic enough to be used for film practice, was a simple task as I was using cognitive film models in my practice, teaching and academic writing long before embarking on this research. So, this step was a re-validation of a practice that has proven particularly useful in my tripartite role as filmmaker-lecturer-scholar. Nevertheless, the research provided an important opportunity to critically assess cognitive film theory in relation to both documentary and stereotypes. As in the analysis of filmmaking textbooks, this endeavour brought to the fore some major shortcomings that I was previously oblivious to: the lack of documentary discourses on and attention to spectatorial social identities; the atavistic insistence on narrative models (a legacy of the neo-formalist and computational paradigms where this field has its origins); the absence of film practice-based approaches; and most significantly, the uncritical examination of folk-psychological formulas that encourage the formation of narrative and social stereotypes. Fortunately, a minority of cognitive film scholars have tentatively addressed these shortcomings and have therefore indicated the way forward. By employing the general cognitive film paradigms of interdisciplinarity, groundedness, pragmatism and self-correction I was able to build on and expand these attempts.

The three practice chapters clearly show that not every method adopts cognitive models. However, this was never the objective, since an exclusive use of this field for the sake of disciplinary homogeneity would run counter to the bricolage approach documentary practice requires and cognitive theory propagates. Still, the overall framing of my practice *is* located in this field, with the use of models from social cognition and folk psychology, the clear distinction between authorship and spectatorship, the pragmatic consideration of documentary as a 'mode of reception', and the numerous models that account for momentary, embodied spectator experiences elicited by textual cues.

The cognitive concept of the filmmaker-audience loop naturally suggests a content analysis as the first stage of film practice. In this case, the content analysis had to first hypothesise a particular audience group. Since filmmaking textbooks and stereotype formation relate to a mainstream audience, Sawyer's (2006) model of the 'public audience' proved useful, even if heuristic. This strategy simultaneously identified my own target audience, placing my films on the *periphery*, but not *outside* the mainstream.<sup>104</sup> This position prevents normative and stereotypical folk-psychological representations, but also precludes experimental representations.

### 7.3 The problem with experimental approaches

In terms of film-formal representation, experimental filmmakers tend to regard the mainstream as hegemonic, distinguishing themselves as 'counter-hegemonic'. For instance, experimental ethnographic films have a long tradition of merging social theory with formal experimentation in a critical and aesthetic discourse on cultural representation (Russell, 1999b, pp. xi–xii). Feminist and post-colonial films, such as Trinh Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) or Peter Kubelka's *Our Trip to Africa* (1966), establish a reflexivity that raises the viewer's awareness of stereotypes and wider socio-cultural discourses. In these types of films, the viewer sees *the film artefact* as cultural representation, instead of seeing *through the film*. This political reflexivity stems mostly from the subversion of narrative *and* social schemas,<sup>105</sup> and while the merit of these films' socio-political, philosophical and conceptual experimentation is indisputable, their discourse-driven plots and ubiquitous political reflexivity predominantly mediate *etic* experience and the filmmakers' alterity, rather than that of the characters (unless they are autobiographical films). Thus, the actual film characters become metonymies for social, political or philosophical statements, and the formal experimentation that aims to break stereotypes, ironically, ends up othering the characters.

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<sup>104</sup> See footnote 11 for an explanation of how 'mainstream' is understood in this thesis.

<sup>105</sup> See Chapter Two for Schweinitz's (2011) distinction between narrative and social schemas.

Experimental films featuring blindness follow the same philosophy. In *Blindly* (2010), Polish artist and filmmaker Artur Żmijewski asks blind people to paint landscapes and animals, eliciting moments of pity and tragedy when the subjects struggle to draw shapes and perspectives. Żmijewski's etic approach clearly intends to subvert stereotypes of blind people as lacking the ability (or opportunity) to paint, and his rather exploitative film fetishises his blind characters' bodies when portraying them applying paint on large sheets of paper, and treats the finished abstract paintings as exotic artefacts. Kristina Steinbock, meanwhile, challenges the politics of ocular-centrism in relation to gender and sexuality. Her two films, *House without Windows* (2011) and *A Romantic Notion of Blindness* (2015), are etic visual essays that place significant aesthetic emphasis on body, touch and the materiality of film form. It is unfortunate that Steinbock treats the under-presented issue of disability, gender and sexuality in conceptually subversive ways that others her blind characters even further – for instance, by completely displacing them from their everyday spaces and practices, and instead showing them engaged in symbolic performances in generic 'non-places' (Augé, 1995). The distributor of Dan Monceaux's film, *A Shift in Perception* (2006), openly declares that the film is a "poetic exploration of living with blindness".<sup>106</sup> The film does indeed make use of most aesthetic tropes mentioned in Chapter Four to distort, obscure and alienate the image in an attempt to subvert ocular-centric viewing habits.

It is interesting that documentaries with a clearly activist agenda, even if they are not experimental, metonymise blind people for socio-political statements in a similar fashion to experimental films. For instance, Shweta Ghosh's *Accsex* (2013) begins with the quote, "This film may subvert the viewing expectations of an able-bodied audience", which immediately establishes an etically mediated cultural discourse that prevails until the end. The multiply disabled characters (one of them is blind) become symbols for a struggle against ableist hegemony, and individual stories are again limited to the disability and overshadowed by the filmmaker's activist agenda. Still, Ghosh's film needs to be applauded as a rare example of a film

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<sup>106</sup> See: <http://www.roninfilms.com.au/feature/612/shift-in-perception.html>

that explores the sexuality of disabled people, albeit embedded in a counter-hegemonic critique, reminiscent of the experimental films mentioned above.

Admittedly, in many cases, it is difficult to ascertain whether all these counter-mainstream films pursue a social-activist or a personal-poetic agenda. Furthermore, it is somewhat dangerous to generalise the intended audience. For instance, Ghosh's film is obviously aimed at a public audience, while Steinbock's was probably created with a limited audience of connoisseurs (artists or consumers of experimental films) in mind. Nevertheless, the ethical implications of representation automatically come to the fore as soon as a film depicts a character from a usually stereotyped and marginalised community, in which case, a consideration of the film's spectatorship is necessary (unless, of course, the filmmaker consciously dismisses the idea or supports the existence of these stereotypes).

#### **7.4 Ethics**

Given the spectatorship-focused scope of this thesis, I did not explore aspects of authorship that had only indirect bearings on spectatorship, such as creativity, intuition and my personal experience. As suggested earlier, my presence and experience are inscribed to a large degree in the films, and emerges at times through political reflexivity, although mostly through deep reflexivity. However, my presence and experience are also inscribed in the written exegesis. Thus, the selection and manner of discussing the case study examples in Chapters Five and Six is indicative of my personal experience with the project and the two characters. Also, my journey of personal and professional growth, and the knowledge I have gained during this research, should be apparent from reading the very first lines in the introduction describing my 2004 documentary through to reading these concluding remarks.

However, one final aspect is the ethical implications of my position as a sighted filmmaker making a film about blind characters. This has two significant

implications that have been raised by audience members at conferences where I showed clips from the films.

The first is that, as Gili Hammer (2013) observes, a sighted person filming a blind person raises “specific complexities resulting from the potential of emphasizing imbalanced power relations and the researcher’s gaze, replicating the participants’ social location as ‘spectacles’ – a position which characterizes their everyday lives as blind and disabled”. This is a serious concern, as it may compromise the entire methodology underlying the mediation of everydayness. The only resolution to this issue would have been an overtly shared authorship – for example, asking Terry and June on-camera how they wanted to be represented, or how they wished to represent their everyday life. It could have even taken the form of involving them in the editing stage to give feedback about different cuts of the film. A more pronounced shared authorship would have comprised a participatory filmmaking venture, in which the characters were either asked to film their own footage or record their own sounds. The former would have had even graver ethical implications, and would have resembled the exploitative spectacle Zmijewski elicits by asking his blind characters to paint animals. The latter approach may have its merits, as recorded everyday sounds or comments could have provided interesting juxtapositions with the images, but the spectator would have to be made aware of the fact that these sounds are generated by Terry and June while the juxtaposition is performed by the filmmaker.

While all these strategies may somewhat compensate for power imbalances and result in a creative filmic experiment, they would utterly defy the mediation of emic experience, since the filmmaking habitus and the agency of the author would shift from the periphery to the centre of the film. As a result, the mediation of emic everydayness would be sacrificed for the sake of political reflexivity through subverting, in a binary fashion, the practice of the blind subject being filmed by a sighted filmmaker. I would argue that this practice, which according to Hammer (2013) poses an ethical conundrum, may be an ableist *practice* but is not an ableist *stereotype*. Hence, it is not necessary to bypass or subvert it in order to reconfigure spectator dispositions, and indeed any attempt to do so would lead to the more

severe ethical implications of further rendering blindness exotic, or would foreground the resourcefulness of the filmmaker.

Interestingly, although the issue of a sighted filmmaker filming a blind person was raised by a few audience members in academic conferences, it was not touched on by individual members of the public audience I showed the clips to on different occasions. With reference to Sawyer's (2006) audience model, discussed in Chapter Three, academics in related disciplines (such as film, disability, anthropology and philosophy) constitute 'connoisseurs', and are likely to be more critical and reflexive, especially in the discursive context of an academic conference. In light of phenomenal immediacy (see Chapter Two) and the mediation of embodied experience, it is unlikely that a member of a public audience would raise such issues or consider the mediated everydayness as spectacle, especially given the numerous strategies to 'de-spectalise' and 'ordinarise' experience. Of course, this hypothesis does not resolve the issue itself, and it certainly does not guarantee the desired outcome, but it provides a critical assumption that could be tested in an audience research study.

Hammer's intervention also implies the impossibility of mediating the emic everyday experience of blindness. After all, as my aim is to render experience visible by mapping and capturing the body situated within space and time, visual impressions only function as metonymic substitutes for the experience of living in a world *without* images. Nevertheless, the concept of mediation acknowledges that a one-to-one *immediation* of emic experience is impossible, since that emic experience is, by default, mediated through filming, editing, exhibiting and reception. Any form of filmic bracketing provides the audience with a new perception of the pro-filmic object and event (Thompson and Bordwell, 2003, p. 91). In addition, that perception is inherently an amalgamation of screen experience and the spectator's own experience. As MacDougall (2006, p. 16) explains "viewing other people's experiences in films is not simply a matter of sharing them but of discovering autonomous bodily responses in ourselves". Thus, although blind characters may seem to pose a methodological and ethical conundrum for mediating emic experience, Chapter Four argues that to hyperbolise

emic experience through simulating blind people's sensory experience or hyper-focusing on emotions in relation to a particular plot trajectory (while excluding a variety of other emotions or other facets of their lives) inevitably leads to othering and stereotyping. Consequently, a pure, *immediate* emic experience of blind people is not only impossible, but undesirable.

The second ethical implication, also raised only by academics (that is, members of a connoisseur audience), is the fact that I represent Terry and June through predominantly using the one sense that is inaccessible to them. Hence, even though I will produce audio description for the films at a later stage, the visual paradigm aimed at eliciting embodied experience excludes them from the hypothesised spectator and hence the target audience. To overcome this, two of these academics suggested adapting the films into an installation that addresses non-visual senses. Although this is an interesting and challenging proposition, it would require the conception of a totally new artefact that operates by engaging with the aural, olfactory, tactile, vestibular, thermoceptive and kinaesthetic senses of the audience. As I am a documentary practitioner, not an installation artist, this would not only require that I learn new skills, but would distract me from pursuing the dissemination of my two 'traditional' films.

Exploring the same ethical issue in *Planet of Snail*, Anne-Marie Callus (2017)<sup>107</sup> points out that the director Seung-Jun Yi made a film *about* the main character Young-Chan, rather than *for* him. However, as she explains, Seung-Jun's film is not a tool for advocating on behalf of deaf-blind people; rather, it gives sighted and hearing people the "opportunity to appreciate more how deaf-blind people negotiate their way in the world". Similar to my argument concerning stereotypical aesthetic tropes that try to approximate the visual perception of blind people, Callus observes that trying to approximate the 'visual' world of blind people by deliberately obscuring the image by blurring it or shrouding it in darkness, in order to homogenise the experience of the viewing spectator and the blind character, and render the film accessible to both, may be even more ethically

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<sup>107</sup> In Brylla, C. and Hughes, H. (eds.). (2017). *Documentary and Disability*. London: Palgrave. (forthcoming)

questionable; viewers would be misled into believing that this is a biologically accurate mediation of blind people's emic experience. Instead, in my films, the open translation of emic experience in a manner that does not pretend to be literally emic allows the audience to experience Terry's and June's lives, but at the same time to become aware that this experience is limited. This maintains a significant level of alterity.

In this context, my films have an activist rather than an advocacy agenda. They aim to raise awareness about blindness stereotypes in sighted people, not create an inclusive media artefact, which would require a completely different research rationale. I consider raising awareness, and the resulting potential benefits to blind people, as a more important ethical pursuit than creating an experimental artwork that may be more appreciated by blind people yet will have a marginal effect on a public audience. Hence, the rationale of this thesis deems social impact more important than accessibility. As Linda Alcoff (1991, p. 15) states, when representing a group of people that has been consistently othered, the socio-political implications within the context of reception exceed mere questions about 'who' represents 'whom' and 'how' – which also explains why neither good intentions, nor announcing the aim of enabling more disabled people to make films about disability issues, are default remedies for deconstructing hegemonic stereotypes (see Chapter Four and Appendix 1). Although good intentions and access to production are vital, filmmakers (whether disabled or not) need to be better equipped to critically understand the socio-political implications when disseminating their work, a consideration that lies at the core of this thesis.

## **7.5 Dissemination**

Since neither of these films was commissioned by a particular institution, collective or individual, and since they both work on the premise of theorising their audience, points about dissemination and reception are tentative and speculative, at least at the current stage. Naturally, given the films' spectatorship-focused approach, as well as their activist agenda, the next stage is to promote them in terms of

exhibition, distribution and exposure. Although this does not lie within the scope of this thesis, it is worth mentioning some preliminary ideas in line with my roles as filmmaker, lecturer and scholar.

The main objective is to reach a public audience, as outlined in Chapter Four. Hence, I will send the films to festivals first, and at the same time, organise community screenings, especially in communities in which disability and/or blindness is ostracised. One such community is the African and Caribbean community in the UK. From personal experience (my partner is Ghanaian, and I have friends in the black community), it appears that community members exhibiting any physical deviance from the norm (for example, albinism, disability, non-normative sexual orientations or non-binary gender) are marginalised. In regard to blindness, the Organisation of Blind Africans and Caribbeans (OBAC) is working hard to improve the situation. I intend to collaborate with OBAC in the organisation of several community screenings for audiences of policy-makers, family members of blind people and the general public.<sup>108</sup> The same idea will be pursued with the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB), BlindArt (an organisation that promotes art created by blind people), ONCE (the Spanish Equivalent of the RNIB) and the BSVO (the Austrian equivalent of the RNIB).

Seminars, with the theme of media representations of blindness and creative activities for blind people (for example, writing and painting), could be combined with these community screenings. In relation to this pedagogic endeavour, I also intend to create a website that hosts information and educational resources on the socio-cultural aspect of blindness, media representation, stereotyping and blind people artists,<sup>109</sup> and at a later point, the films will be uploaded there. This website will be unlike the websites of some of the film case studies analysed in Chapter Four, which provide a plethora of medical information about blindness, again adopting an ableist perspective (see footnote 43). With regards to the 'blindness and creativity' aspect, the RNIB makes a considerable

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<sup>108</sup> The fact that my characters are white may add an interesting cross-cultural dimension to the project, and even positively influence the notion of alterity.

<sup>109</sup> Blindness and the Arts (<http://www.blindnessandarts.com/>) is an excellent repository for resources and information about blindness and the arts, including representation, inclusion, access, education and policies, although it contains very little on documentary representation.

effort to encourage blind people to engage in creative activities, partly for therapeutic and partly for economic reasons. It has a dedicated arts officer with whom I can liaise over the possibility of cutting a shorter version of Terry's film, specifically focusing on his painting process, to serve as an educational video. Obviously, the video will have to have audio description and more verbal exposition, in the form of additional interviews with Terry, for example.

After the festival circuit, and in parallel with promoting the website and organising community screenings, I will submit the films to suitable broadcasters that, like my films, are on the periphery of the mainstream, such as The Community Channel. The plan is to also generate non-academic articles (such as interviews, news items, features and social-media items) raising public awareness about the impact of disability stereotypes and suggesting possible correctives that could be employed by media producers. Stimulating awareness of disability stereotyping among media producers is as much at the heart of this project as audience awareness. Appendix 1 provides a general idea of the British media industry's attitude and practices towards disability representation, and the picture is bleak. It appears that while there is indeed awareness of disability representation issues, that awareness is not critically informed by mechanisms of stereotype generation. Thus, I hope that any form of dissemination will reach media producers and policy-makers, and prompt them to rethink current practices, guidelines and policies.

In terms of academic dissemination, the thesis is not only relevant to disability studies, but, as already mentioned, it also adds to discourses in cognitive film studies, documentary film studies, anthropology and cultural studies. Thus far, I have presented my research at several academic conferences and received positive feedback in relation to the new knowledge it aims to generate,<sup>110</sup> and it has triggered three (forthcoming) publications.<sup>111</sup> In addition, a network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is in the tentative planning stages.

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<sup>110</sup> See Appendix 2 for a list of conferences.

<sup>111</sup> A book chapter in a forthcoming anthology, *Conditions of Mediation: Phenomenological Approaches to Media, Technology and Communication*, edited by Markham and Rodgers, will be published by Peter Lang in 2016, and two co-edited anthologies are forthcoming in 2017 and 2018 respectively: *Documentary and Disability* (Brylla and Hughes, 2017) and *Cognitive Theory and Documentary* (Brylla and Kramer, 2018), both published by Palgrave Macmillan.

This aims to offer a dialogue between disability and documentary scholars, but also including activists, policy-makers and media practitioners, and the results will be published through symposia and publications. The network will also exhibit films and audio-visual (AV) essays about disability issues, specifically including films by disabled filmmakers. It is hoped that the format of the exhibition platform will combine the scope of online AV journals, like *Screenworks*<sup>112</sup> and *(in)Transition*,<sup>113</sup> with online exhibition platforms such as *Disability Arts Online*.<sup>114</sup>

The thesis has also been indirectly disseminated through my pedagogical activities. I have introduced lectures and seminars on representation, stereotyping and disability into my teaching, as the curriculum of the current BA in Film Production at the University of West London previously had no such provisions. For example, on a first-year film production module, students have to make a short drama about a character belonging to a social group that is usually stereotyped in media: they are asked to interview and film a real-life character, and this serves as the basis for the fictional screenplay. In addition, they are given the task of undertaking a content analysis of related films in order to evaluate common stereotypes, which then they try to undo in their own films. According to Wayne (2003, pp. 55–56), such a theorised film practice combines two benefits for student filmmakers: firstly, the students’ knowledge is considerably enhanced through direct engagement, as they concretely experience the *object* of knowledge, and secondly, they become conscious and therefore critical of the multiple determinations on their practices, and this “helps to enlarge the scope for human agency over structure and make genuine choices over habituated routines”. Wayne’s second point is particularly relevant to the critical interrogation of folk-psychological narratives and the mediation of alterity and emic experience.

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<sup>112</sup> See the Screenworks website: <http://screenworks.org.uk/>

<sup>113</sup> See the (in)Transition website: <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/>

<sup>114</sup> See the Disability Arts Online website: <http://disabilityarts.online/>

## 7.6 Reception

In terms of the films' reception, this project adopts a filmmaker's perspective, theorising its audience. On a film-practice level, working with a hypothesised audience is pragmatic and largely unproblematic, as relying on what Tan (1996) calls the 'natural viewer' is the general *modus operandi* of independent filmmaking. From a cognitive perspective, Tan explains that every film has its natural viewer – a prototypical construct for an empirical category of viewers who not only share interests and knowledge but also a mindset, insofar as they are watching the film voluntarily, non-analytically and with an open mind (p. 11). Aligning with Sawyer's public audience category, the natural viewer describes a body of spectators who share the same cognitive schemas in relation to media representations of, and real-world attitudes towards, blindness (as outlined in Chapters Two and Four), and who are open to the possibility that these schemas could be temporarily reconfigured or at least questioned, whether or not conscious interpretations of meanings converge, diverge or take place at all. Unlike amateurs and connoisseurs, the public or natural viewer tends not to consciously embrace, reject or intellectually ruminate over what they experience during a film. All in all, the flexible and pragmatic notion of the natural viewer should be conflated neither with the rigid psychoanalytic theory of 'subject position' (see Chapter Three), nor with Hall's (1980) fixed notion of a 'dominant-hegemonic position' or 'preferred reading'.

However, even if filmmakers usually construct their films in relation to the natural viewer, empirical audience studies are standard procedure in several mainstream and commercial domains, such as advertisements and promotional films. Also, high-budget films undergo test screenings in order to assess their commercial appeal and their adherence to ethical guidelines or culturally established moral attitudes. Even independent filmmakers practise the showing of rough cuts to individuals or test-audiences for informal feedback. In fact, I did this with both films by showing rough cuts to three connoisseurs (film scholars), one amateur (freelance filmmaker) and one public viewer. It is interesting to note that their reactions and comments strongly aligned with the objectives of this thesis. Nevertheless, the small size of the sample and the informal setting of these

screenings do not justify their theorisation or evaluation here (although I have included some of their most relevant comments in Appendix 3). They are only mentioned in order to demonstrate that, as an informal filmmaking practice, empirical audience data is often gathered and implemented in a very heuristic manner, and most members of the filmmaking community (including practice-based scholars) would agree that a rigorous audience research study for the purposes of conceptualising a film is neither practical nor desirable.

On a purely academic research level, however, a dedicated audience research or ethnographic study could be regarded as a necessary undertaking in order to verify a spectatorship-focused project that hypothesises audience responses. However, there are three objections to this assumption in relation to my practice-based research context. Firstly, such a verification would have gone far beyond the scope and space of the written thesis. Secondly, in a setting where theory has been used as a critical approach to film practice, such a study would have been immensely complicated and potentially compromised the formulation of a critical methodology, completely shifting the research context and design to (in my opinion) the detriment of the project. Thirdly, it could be argued that the filmmaker-audience loop, the content analysis of filmmaking textbooks and of films depicting blind people, and the use of cognitive theory, which is based on empirical audience studies, all provide a strongly empirical foundation to my filmmaking practice.

Nevertheless, although an audience research study may not be deemed a necessity, I am planning to informally gather data at public screenings through recorded Q&As, discussions and/or questionnaires. Apart from being a useful part of my strategy to promote the films, this data (perhaps, at a later stage, in conjunction with dedicated focus-group screenings) can inform a proper audience-research evaluation. The purpose would not be to verify the reception of emic experience, everydayness or alterity – these concepts are merely tools for achieving the ultimate goal of the case study, which is the reconfiguration of blindness stereotypes – but the focus would be on the audience's attitude towards and experience of blind people before and after the film viewing. Consequently, since

the aim is to elicit a change in previous dispositions by viewing the films, the data needs to also capture dispositions before the viewing. The methodology of the audience research study will be Grounded Theory (GT), which has several similarities with the methodology used in this thesis. In principle, GT inductively generates or discovers the theory used to interpret the data from the data itself (Glaser and Strauss, 1999, p. 3). In GT the phenomenon is first described as it appears, and then analysed in order to provide a conceptual context that explains it (p. 7, p. 22). This means that GT, at its core, resembles my methodology of gathering phenomenological data which is subsequently naturalised in order to create concepts that inform film form. Of course, the data gathered through the films' screenings will be loosely framed by issues of blindness, disability, representation and stereotypes, but the use of GT aims to prevent confirmation bias by allowing for discrepancies between actual and intended reception, and by producing theories that can explain these discrepancies.

This audience research study would particularly gauge public audience reactions that indicate not only a reconfiguration of stereotypes, but a corresponding effort to change behaviour. For instance, studies have shown that among people who are open to stereotype correction, the reflexive detection of stereotypes or the experience of representations that exhibit discrepancies with their schematic dispositions are likely to generate "feelings of guilt and compunction [which as a] negative self-related affect serves a warning function that induces people to be more careful with their responses and thus prompts them to behave in unprejudiced ways" (Bodenhausen *et al.*, 2001, p. 337). Of course, it would be naive to assume that my two films can impact on common attitudes and behaviour, even if their dissemination reaches its maximum potential. Nevertheless, what I am propagating here is a change in filmmakers' thinking about the representation of disability. Thus, my films can hopefully contribute to the generation of an alternative body of films that can, alongside the current predominant body of films analysed in Chapter Four, firstly relativise and secondly reconfigure predominant stereotypes and, eventually, social attitudes towards blindness.

## 7.7 Mediating ordinariness/everydayness

The thesis has argued that such a reconfiguration is possible by refusing to train the narrative focus exclusively on visual impairment and by mediating everydayness so that the spectator can experience the blind character as an 'ordinary' person, instead of seeing in them, as Tasha Chemel (n.d.) is quoted in Chapter Four, the "need to overcome, to inspire and stand as shining examples of the extraordinary power of the human spirit". Stella Young (2014) sums up this approach, manifest in what she sarcastically terms 'inspirational porn', when she comments, "disabled people don't do anything out of the ordinary, they just use their bodies to the best of their capacities". Young's statement calls for abled people to look beyond what they deem extraordinary, and instead consider the ordinariness of disabled people from their own perspective. Thus, the notion of ordinariness in my research relates to what is experienced as ordinary by my blind screen characters, and the task of my films is to mediate that ordinariness to the seeing audience. For instance, Terry writing on a Braille typewriter or June working as an internationally known disability access auditor may appear extraordinary to the viewer, but they are ordinary attributes of the characters' lives, and they are represented as such, using filmic methods to elicit an equivalent ordinary experience in the spectator.

This research, therefore, explored the mediation of ordinariness through positioning spectatorial experience in relation to the everyday material interaction of screen body, space and objects, which arguably results in a more convergent audience response, enabling a collective reconfiguration of stereotypes. Furthermore, embodied experience constitutes a level of reception that does not require the theorising of top-down processes, such as interpretation. Although the conceptualisation of embodied experience relies on common schemas that cognitively operate in similar ways to stereotypes, these schemas are corporeal and, with reference to Merleau-Ponty's work, they echo our accumulated experience of daily routines, cyclicity, materialities and disruptions, and place the spectator's body into a 'proxy habitus' that feels ordinary, even if experienced from an extraordinary character's perspective. Unlike the mechanisms of stereotypical social schemas that use binary simplification to maintain established boundaries, the

corporeal schemas hypothesised here aim to transcend boundaries and binaries through mediating emic everyday experience in a form that resonates with (but does not equal) the audience's own everyday experience.

Throughout the production and postproduction process, using the everyday (or ordinary) as a vehicle for undoing the extraordinariness of blind people was a high-wire act, since I always had the feeling that the filmic bracketing of Terry's and June's ordinary routines or objects by default '*extraordinarises*' their everyday and, by implication, also their screen characters. As Highmore (2002a) argues, any attempt to describe or interpret the everyday transforms it by '*de-everydaying*' it; "to attend to it is to lose it" (p. 20). In terms of representation, film scholars repeatedly and consistently associate the elicitation of everyday experience with the filmic strategies of observation, long takes, wide shots, slow pace, narrative arrest and narrative incoherence, aiming to induce spectatorial experiences of realism, boredom and real-time, non-authorial intervention (see, for example, Margulies, 1996; Rassos, 2005; de Luca, 2013). However, Highmore warns against everyday representations that are subjected to a seemingly appropriate, homogenous and coherently theorised discourse, because what is deemed an appropriate form for portraying the everyday, results in the exclusion of some of its aspects (p. 21).

To give one example, two major aspects that most film discourses purport to be inherently quotidian, 'boredom' and 'arrest', deny experiences on the opposite side of the everyday spectrum. As argued in the previous two chapters, the everyday is heterogeneous and ambivalently oscillates between flow and disruption, movement and arrest, routine and ritual, anticipation and surprise, regularity and deviation, cyclicity and randomness, utilised and possessed objects, fragments and complete structures, and discrete moments and progressive sequences. Consequently, different forms of the everyday require different forms of representation, and "the everyday might be more productively glimpsed if the propriety of discourses is refused" (p. 21). Michael Taussig (1991, p. 147) suggests that acknowledging a plurality of the everyday discloses its commonality, despite one person's everyday being different from another's. It attributes a common sense

to the everyday, an ability to experience everydayness, regardless of social, cultural or economic background. Thus, for this everydayness to be experienced across individuals, it must neither be coherent nor totalised, and this benefits the mediation of alterity. Approaching the everyday as incoherent, elusive and ambiguous, yet particular and embodied, inherently mediates the alterity of the agent of that everyday experience. Perhaps the best metaphor for everydayness is Terry's painting process. Every stage is different and reveals disparate elements of Terry's alter (for example, his autonomy when applying the plasticine, yet his dependence on Pam when mixing and applying the paint). His relationship to the painting remains ambiguous, and its genesis and fate unresolved. Both films operate in the same way, illustrating that everydayness constitutes and is constituted by the human being him/herself. Thus, the films represent ambivalent and unfinished character portraits, with no apparent purpose in terms of traditional disability activism or folk-psychological engagement; they portray two people who ordinarily are not fixed characters but are 'work-in-progress' (to use Sieber's reference in relation to historicity in Chapter Five).

However, there is another ambivalent oscillation that reflects the plurality and commonality of everydayness, which is rarely acknowledged in representational discourses but may be the most essential when it comes to representation: the oscillation between observation and authorial bracketing. My practice exhibits the ambiguity of deep reflexivity in relation to simultaneously observing *and* intervening in the characters' everyday lives in a variety of ways (for example, the back shot, the filmmaking motif or the intertitles of narrative fragments). The clash of the character's habitus with that of the filmmaker's constitutes the interaction of two everyday lives and mediates the ordinariness of filmic bracketing itself. However, this etic ordinariness does not pretend to be politically reflexive or intentionally draw attention to itself, although it can be perceived more in some instances than in others. Rather, it is peripheral by virtue of its banal and (seemingly) ordinary aesthetics (for example, the long, static observation of back shots, or the basic intertitles), and reinforces Terry's and June's everydayness.

This focus of this research on everydayness (and by implication on alterity), and its practical application, is potentially valuable for everyday discourses in a variety of fields, including anthropology, cultural studies, film studies and disability studies. Even cognitive film studies, which tend to focus on normative folk-psychological narratives that usually avoid the ordinary or everyday, may benefit from a model that explores momentary experiences through different, even disparate, modes of spectatorial address. Therefore, the research could prove an important contribution to the minority of cognitive scholarship that analyses non-normative or non-mainstream films.

### **7.8 Stereotypes and stereotype-undoing**

As the very last point of this thesis, I would like to offer a brief, reflexive flashback to the issue of stereotyping. The undoing of blindness stereotypes was the avowed case-study-based aim of this project. The methodology charted common stereotypes and corresponding social schemas of blind people – schemas that would inform the dispositions of a public spectator watching my films. Identifying these schemas enabled the formulation of alternative portrayals that would attempt to reconfigure these stereotypical dispositions through eliciting an embodied experience of everyday spaces and temporalities. This experience operates through low-level audience responses to film form, which was hypothesised through a variety of theoretical approaches rooted in cognitive theory. The postulation of a (more or less) homogenous audience response was thus grounded in a spectatorship that is fundamentally hard-wired, psychosomatic and non-hermeneutic (though higher-level hermeneutic processes, such as polysemic interpretations, are not denied), but also grounded in the established homogeneity of public dispositions towards blindness, which is in turn based on the persistence and rigidity of blindness stereotypes. At least in terms of argumentative consistency and the methodology-in-practice, the pragmatic yet rigorous approach is considered to have provided satisfactory results in undoing hegemonic stereotypes through theory and practice.

For the sake of methodological coherence, the concept of the stereotype has been used in the sense of socio-cultural hegemony. However, it is paramount to remind once more that this is a highly specific and contextualised use of the concept, and it should not be generalised. Alas, everyday language habitually demonises the stereotype by attaching it to ideas that are deemed negative, harmful or ignorant. Moskovitz (2005, pp. 438–439) clarifies that this naive understanding of the concept is misleading, as stereotypes are category-based expectancies of other people (and here ‘other’ alludes to Levinas’s phenomenological ‘other’ who differs from the ‘I’), which in our everyday lives inform interpersonal cognition from preconscious stages (e.g. automated, schematic characterisation) to conscious stages of deliberate decision-making.

Within disability and post-colonial studies, two disciplines that thoroughly examine the stereotype in similar hegemonic contexts, it is all too common to denounce its general concept, allowing only for little room to adopt a more differentiated discourse that does not automatically ideologise modes of perception and representation. This tendency is restrictive, as it potentially confines the discourse to a niche of academics and activists, preventing the actual reconfiguration of global, public structures. In contrast, social cognition studies distinguish between ‘othering’ stereotypes, stereotypes as social schemas, and the general concept of schema. These distinctions are necessary for a bricolage and critical methodology that aims to have a public impact within a specific context.

For instance, this thesis has argued that it is only the particular combination of folk-psychological narrative schemas (which are not inherently hegemonic or ideological) with social stereotypes of blind people that creates and perpetuates an ableist hegemony. In addition, my own methodology for un-othering blind people cannot function without schemas and stereotypes. The naturalisation of emic experience on the post-filmic level, which aims to ensure a particular intersubjective mediation between film and spectator, is inevitably based on the conceptualisation of specific schemas that evoke June’s and Terry’s alterity and everyday experience. As these schemas relate to how the spectator perceives these two characters, they are in essence stereotypes, too, especially if other filmmakers were to adopt this approach for portraying blind people. Nevertheless, these are significantly different

to the hegemonic stereotypes that other blind people, especially since they don't function in relation to the blind community as a whole. The screen characters of June and Terry are not synecdoches for the collective of blind people but exist as discreet entities.

My point is that a substantial critique of certain schemas and stereotypes in particular permutations should not be seen as a categorical rejection of these, but rather an acknowledgement of existing configurations that can be *reconfigured* by using similar mechanisms or even by partly building on old configurations. Thus, in a seemingly perverse final twist in the discourse of my entire project, I may even have to capitalise on othering stereotypes when marketing *June* and *Terry*. Paradoxically, the films deliberately avoid the tried-and-tested folk-psychological narrative recipe for a public audience success, whilst aiming to achieve a wide dissemination within exactly that audience. As a consequence, paratextual materials (e.g. logline and synopsis) would have to not only mention but actually *emphasise* the characters' blindness. After all, it is improbable that exhibition gatekeepers (festival organisers, commissioning editors, distributors, etc.) would select a film described as the "everyday experience of an ordinary person". Thus, in order to elicit a public audience's interest, I have to consider their stereotypical expectation of emotion-driven stories featuring blind people as a necessary evil and turn it to my advantage. Even more perversely, my films could indirectly profit from the contemporary success of films, such as *Notes on Blindness* and *Black Sun*, which have evoked considerable public interest (even if shaped by ableist views) in blind characters. Of course, my consolation is that this exhibition-related resort to hegemonic stereotyping is only paratextual, whereas the actual film text attempts to dismantle these very stereotypes.

Essentially, the combination of critical practice and bricolage conceptualisation, which has been the main research paradigm, is meant to block any dogmatic approach, but in hindsight, I have to admit that this paradigm needs to go far beyond my expectations of dealing purely with filmic representation. It needs to inform the films' dissemination, their public audience and future research; it appears that undoing blindness stereotypes cannot happen in a vacuum, and the

way forward may need to include a difficult negotiation between 'stereotyping' (in a hegemonic sense) and 'stereotype-undoing'.

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## Appendix 1: Media Industry and Representation of Disability

*NOTE: This short text relates to television, given its institutionally regulated procedures with regards to inclusion and discrimination. It was written to be added to Chapter Three, but in the end it was considered supplementary information, not essential for the main exegesis.*

Rimmerman (2013, p. 149) argues that despite media producers unintentionally marginalising people with disabilities in order “to appeal to public stereotypes”, there has also been effort to change these stereotypes. For example, an audience research study, *Disabling Prejudice – Attitudes towards Disability and its Portrayal on Television* (Sancho, 2003), commissioned by the BBC, the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) and Independent Television Commission (ITC), suggests five triggers that may promote the audience’s acceptance of disabled people in TV programmes (pp. 57-59): (1) *Matching* (showing that disabled people are like “us”), (2) *Likeability* (positively valenced emotions towards disabled people in relation to humour, achievement and engaging personalities), (3) *Celebrity* (a famous actor or celebrity playing the disabled person), (4) *Incidental inclusion* (a disabled person not being primarily characterised through their disability) and (5) *Educational/Information ‘shorts’* (specialist seasons that pick up a particular disability issue and show that disabled person’s point of view).

Whilst this study is a thorough investigation of TV spectatorship, the conclusions are largely made without being based on a content analysis, but based on the viewers and their own evaluations. Thus, the evaluation of the study did not make any reference to disability studies, nor cultural or media studies. Furthermore, given that approach from a spectator’s perspective, there was no single mention or analysis of aesthetic treatments of disability. Given that audio-visual film grammar constitutes the specificity of the TV medium, it is surprising that the study did not critically assess its own modes of mediation, identifying, for instance, stereotypical emotion metaphors. Instead, the focus was exclusively on the viewer’s generic and superficial accounts of story and plot, such as “There’s just

no reality...so superficial the coverage and so often the disabled people are victims or vulnerable. It's not very encouraging to disabled people. You so rarely see successful disability." (p. 42). Consequently, schematic formulas found in plot structures and character roles were not discussed or identified.

Examining the five triggers the study suggests for inducing change, there is clear evidence for perpetuating the previously mentioned stereotypical tropes. For example, the "Matching" trigger openly suggests the universalisation of disabled people in order to share interchangeable qualities and values. Admittedly, this universalisation, according to the author, should not focus on the disability itself, but promoting intrinsic human qualities. However, it latently propagates folk-psychological narratives that transfer inter-subjectively shareable emotions and motivations. In addition, by actively deemphasising the disability and promoting "sameness", the alterity of characters is bound to be lost.

The "Likeability" trigger is an open proposition towards positive stereotyping and proliferates the uplifting feel-good factor (see *The Undateables*), as well as the supercrip narrative. Interestingly, the author asserts that these five triggers may help to avoid negative stereotyping, which she claims is the main factor for exacerbating difference and thus distance (p. 57, p. 62). Thus, positive stereotyping is accepted, and its implication of creating otherness (e.g. the quasi supernatural use of non-visual senses in blind people) is not acknowledged. Positive stereotyping is strongly embedded in folk-psychological, character-based narratives that portray the main character as a sort of hero (whether (s)he needs to overcome his fear or trauma of becoming blind, climb a mountain despite being blind, or defy social stigmatisation in general). Examples of identifying the risks of positive media stereotypes as perpetuating otherness appear to stem from non-media related sources. For instance, the booklet *Media Guidelines for the Portrayal of Disability* (Sánchez, 2015), commissioned by The International Labour Organization (ILO), suggests that disabled people should not be represented as "heroes" who achieve apparently unrealistic goals, despite the public's admiration for high achievers.

The "Incidental Inclusion" trigger is the one that mostly appropriates the findings of the content analysis, i.e. the integration of disabled people in different

roles that do not depend on their disability. On the other hand, the “Educational/Information” trigger may result in educational value and intellectual awareness, but the risk of social and medical ghettoising through particular programming/labelling is high.

This study confirms Darke’s and Markotić’s arguments about visibility. Whilst developments in equal rights and political correctness have indeed triggered a higher visibility of disabled people in media, there is still a long way to go in order to undo the othering of that visibility. Alas, media’s reluctance towards critical self-reflection (in terms of spectatorship and resulting socio-cultural views of certain communities), and its simultaneous insistence on increasing audience ratings and reach a mainstream audience through the perpetual use of folk-psychological narratives, constitute deeply embedded and fossilised thinking patterns that prove highly resistant to that change.

For example, 104 Films is a small independent production company that produces films by and about disabled people, *Notes on Blindness* being one of their most critically acclaimed films. At a Q&A at the *Rethinking Disability on Screen* conference (York University, 2015) I asked co-founder and producer Alex Usborne whether he engages in a green-lighting or reviewing process of film proposals to flag the potential of spreading disability stereotypes, to which he replied that he gives directors almost total freedom to pursue their artistic vision, since, especially with disabled filmmakers, this demonstrates their policy of inclusion and guarantees the success of their films. Dodging the issue of stereotyping is symptomatic for producers and content creators who fail to critically discuss representation and spectatorship in terms of their impact on society, unless that impact consists of critical acclaim and wide distribution.

## Appendix 2: Conferences

Parts of this thesis and clips from the films have been presented at the following academic conferences:

- *Off the Lip – Transdisciplinary Approaches to Cognitive Innovation Conference* (September 2015; University of Plymouth)
- *Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Images Conference* (June 2015; Birkbeck, University of London)
- *Disability and Disciplines: The International Conference on Educational, Cultural, and Disability Studies* (July 2015; Liverpool Hope University)
- *Rethinking Disability on Screen Symposium* (May 2015; University of York)
- *Directions and Connections across Anthropology* (June 2014; University College London)
- *Domestic Imaginaries: Homes in Film, Literature and Popular Culture Symposium* (January 2014; University of Nottingham)
- *Ordinary/Everyday/Quotidian Conference* (September 2013; University of York)
- *Documentary and (Dis)ability Symposium* (September 2013; University of Surrey)
- *Theorising Practice, Practising Theory – Postgraduate Training Workshop* (April 2013; University of Roehampton).

## Appendix 3: Viewers' Comments

### Connoisseur Viewers

"Terry is irascible and you get that over really well and the sense of his frustration whereas June seems more reconciled to the lack of sight."

"I found it [both films] a bit long because it is repetitive in places - some scenes are too 'mundane'."

"What I like is the sense of him [Terry] being with people, but he is basically a solitary person [unlike June]".

"Both films really feel 'random' and 'everyday' without any teleological structures."

"The openness of the structure works really well [in both films]."

### Amateur Viewer

"[Terry's] film is not really about painting. Nobody cares about the painting, and it helps not to see the final outcome, so we are let off the hook to judge a blind person's painting if we don't like it."

"The painting seems excruciatingly slow, full of disruptions and frustrations"

"June's film is very stagnant. The dreary, mundane and unexciting tone of the film reflects her persona."

### Public Viewer

*On June's film:*

"It feels very ordinary and uneventful – there is no drama, no emotion, no anticipation of good or bad news; it is a peaceful representation of someone who happens to have a disability."

"I felt no pity nor heroism toward her, neither and sense of achievement."

"The film is not about disability, or not about anything, but it is about this person, and the blindness is not at the centre at all; it feels incidental."

“The titles help, so it does not flow in one continuous flow of boringness; and they also create some structure.”

*On Terry’s film:*

“The film is about a blind man who is very creative, extrovert, sharp-minded and witty, and naturally funny – the blindness is more obvious, especially as he feels more about his blindness.”

“His environment is very claustrophobic, and you feel sorry for him having to paint and live in such a tiny and messy home.”

“When he expresses his frustrations about being filmed, he still seems to love being filmed – he performs for the camera.”

“In some scenes, rather than watching a film about ordinary life, it is like watching ordinary ‘filmmaking’”.