



# **The Edge of Dreaming**

**by**

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of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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# ABSTRACT

**The Edge of Dreaming** is a PhD by practice, consisting of one feature documentary film and a 45,000 word thesis. I locate my practice in the cultural, historic, personal and aesthetic context of autobiographical film-making.

There are two main research questions:

1. What sort of film language and structure can I produce to create room for the audience in this autobiographical film?
2. What sort of knowledge do I obtain, and share, in exploring the subject of death and dreams through autobiographical film-making?

The thesis covers the period of time from 2003 to 2010 including research, film-making, scripting, editing and screening the film to audiences. Dreams and death are examined from scientific, psychotherapeutic and shamanic perspectives through the literature review. Case studies of other film-makers clarify 'character', audience engagement and ethical concerns in first person film-making. Methodology, cinematic language, story and essay structure are explored in the context of the imperative to make this particular film.

The primary template of my research is the creative process. By sharing the decision making about how to structure the practice output - **The Edge of Dreaming** – this thesis aims to make my creative and scholarly research transparent, so that the solutions shown in the film can be deconstructed and this articulation can be transferred to others and expand the field of first person documentary research.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Overview

This PhD by practice centres on the submission of a feature length documentary **The Edge of Dreaming**. This 45,000 word dissertation demonstrates the conceptual, historical, and scholarly investigation behind the research, making and screening of the documentary.

The dissertation also offers itself as a creative journey, an exploration that runs parallel with the creating of the film. It is more than a justification and a reflection on the final film: it chronicles my attempt to find the raw material and the cinematic language that would let me explore the research territory. It includes both verbalised experiments in creative treatments of reality and excerpts of my work diaries as the core of the reflective process behind this dissertation.

The documentary submitted - **The Edge of Dreaming** - is created around three dreams I had during the research period. The practice output is highly autobiographical. I began my PhD in 2003, going part time after the first year. In 2006 I had three dreams that focussed my research into first person film-making. These dreams were firstly, that my horse was going to die that night; the second told me that I was going to die that year; and the third showed me how I would die. The first was proved true, and I devoted the final year of my PhD by practice

to making sure the predictions of the second and third dreams would not be fulfilled.

I structure this dissertation around the essential background research to making a practice based work on the theme of death, and the documentation and analysis yielded by the iterative reflective process arising from the work as it is being made. The themes explored include death as it is presented through examples of cultural and historical reading; an enquiry into dreams; a discussion of what knowledge is, and an exploration of how to deepen the audience engagement with the practice-based output itself.

I explore these themes from different perspectives: a *scientific* stance as represented by Richard Dawkins, amongst others; a *psychotherapeutic* viewpoint through Carl Gustav Jung and a *shamanic* tradition through various anthropological writings.

Throughout, I make references to my own involvement in these topics, signalling within the dissertation when I unearth facts and opinions that feed directly into the treatment for my film. Although I was motivated to begin the PhD on the broad theme of death by being with my mother when she died unexpectedly, it was after the three dreams that I chose to make a film about myself, scripted, directed, shot and perceived through my eyes – whether open or closed. This produced a further area of research: how can I make room for the audience in such a personal project? In the dissertation I give a few examples that trace the entire journey from first enquiry to the screen moment in the final work. In this way, the thesis can also be read as an archaeology of the creative

process behind the finished film. A brief overview of each section of the PhD follows.

**Chapter One: Understanding Through Practice** introduces the primary template of my research, including my research questions. I locate my practice in the cultural, historic, personal and aesthetic context I have explored in the preceding chapters. I define my ambitions for the film, and the limits of my enquiry, and I identify the two specific questions that structure the PhD by practice in terms of film language, audience, subjectivity, and ontology. These are:

1. What sort of film language and structure can I produce that allows me to create room for the audience in this autobiographical film?
2. What sort of knowledge do I obtain, and share, in exploring the subject of death and dreams through autobiographical film-making?

I argue my case for choosing understanding through the specific practice of making an autobiographical documentary as a means of exploring death. By sharing the process of decision making about how to structure the practice output - **The Edge of Dreaming** - this thesis aims to make my creative and scholarly research process transparent, so that the solutions shown in the film can be deconstructed and this articulation can be transferred to others and expand the field of first person documentary research.

**Chapter Two: Autobiographical Film-making** examines the subjective experience as the staple of autobiographical film-making. I recognise that my own film-making will take part in a context which is currently questioning the who and how of its

own representation. I turn to three film-makers as case studies who take different approaches to the articulation of the 'self' in their film: Jennifer Fox, Annie Griffin and Margarethe Olin. Exploring their choices of how to articulate a multiple reality clarifies what I will be required to do as I explore death in my own film. Beginning with Michael Renov's assertion – after Roland Barthes - that death is the special calling of cinema, I investigate the way several films explore death, ending with Kiti Luostarinen and teasing apart the similarities and differences in our motivation and aims. I conclude that I want a different relation with the audience: an emotional, unconscious as well as intellectual response. My challenge to myself, and the first research sub-question, is this: how can I create a film that both engages and gives enough room to the audience so that they can go on the journey with me, but bring their own experiences and perceptions to this first-person documentary?

**Chapter Three: Literature Review** balances the personal, subjective nature of my experience of death, by setting the scope of my research outwith my own immediate cultural and historical context. Accordingly, my first study is on Phillip Aries, whose historical and literary analysis of the Tenth to Twentieth century defines death in its relation to the community and the individual.

Moving forward from Aries' notes about the hospitalisation and consequent 'embarrassingly graceless' death in this century, I spend some time exploring the key twentieth century thinkers around death and dying, such as Marie de Hennezel and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who have had a formative effect on our

current practices, particularly in hospices. Noting how their understanding of behaviour around death depends on basic concepts of psycho-analysis, and even mysticism, I examine how their, and indeed, any, notion of death is embedded in an ontology, and produces its own definition of what counts as knowledge and truth.

I explore how one evidence-based paradigm of scientific thinking uses the 'meme' to explain the ubiquity of spiritual beliefs, and how spiritual thinking dismisses the necessity for scientific evidence. The same facts can be cited by both sides as supporting their own ontology. This discussion is played out as I engage with the topic of shamanism, and then psycho-analysis, contextualising my choice of interpretation within significant existing bodies of relevant knowledge. The paradox at the heart of one shamanic demonstration is highlighted to return to later, in a discussion about authenticity, art and autobiographical film-making.

Dreams are integral to shamanic practice, and I begin with an anthropological account of prophetic dreams, before engaging with the man who can be described as responsible for much of our current interest in dreams: Carl Gustav Jung. Reviewing those scholars who attempt to synthesise scientific and spiritual paradigms I study the work of Arnold Mindell, where he focuses on what happens to individuals as their death approaches.

Taking the discussion of knowledge and its expression further in a further research sub-question, I look into a mystical definition of storytelling, 'curanderisma' in order to ask what sort of knowledge such storytelling, and prophetic dreams,

produce. I conclude my discussion of dreams through evolutionary determinism, psycho-analysis and shamanism by accepting that each is a belief system, each yield knowledge and each interpret experience. I decide to go back into my own subjective experience as the arbiter of each frame of reference, scrutinising what they produce throughout the period of my PhD.

**Chapter Four: Reflections on Process** begins with a historical account of my initial motivation to make the film and chronicles the creative development throughout the period of study, using my diaries and workbooks as the raw materials from which I deepen the themes referred to in the first chapters. I show examples from my workbooks to illuminate the process by which I chose the final approach of the documentary, and have included examples of trying out ideas, approaches, scripting or ideas that did not make it into the final cut, but clarified and refined my practice. This leads to a clarification of the sub-questions arising from this reflexive process. After a further discussion contextualising the role of self-inscription, the ethics of filming my own family, the use of narrative and other fictive tropes in life writing, I turn to the role of the audience in both shaping and responding to the film. This section ends with the presentation of the film to the public, and an account of the workshops I ran for audiences after film screenings.

Two **appendices** are presented: a detailed methodology of the use of audience workshops and focus groups; and an overview of **The Edge of Dreaming** screenings.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **UNDERSTANDING THROUGH PRACTICE**

This is research by practice, and the theoretical work both underpins and is a reflection of the concrete endeavour that has produced the submitted films. This section presents my rationale for choosing understanding through practice as the primary template of my research. It ends by presenting several unique challenges that have arisen from this methodological viewpoint.

### **THE RESEARCH FIELD**

My research questions are situated in the well-established documentary context of autobiographical film-making. I am both director and main character. My motivation to make the film comes from events in my own life. I want to understand something, (my mother's death, my dreams) so I make a documentary about it.

My PhD aims to further explore the subjective in documentary. Building on the work of Renov, Citron, Griffin, Clifford, Eakin, Scott and MacDougall, my thesis and practice explore the contradictory, inconsistent locus of self through what I see, and how I reflect on it. I aim to create a relationship with the audience where they have room to position themselves in relation to my process. The audience get to know me through the events in my life and how I reflect on them, rather than

seeing and projecting onto me. As a mother of three children, and motivated at least in part by the death of my own mother, my family appear frequently. They are more than textural, or background – the children, horses, dog, cat, husband and landscape express my identity, not just through their familial relationship to me, but particularly through the act of my perceiving them with the camera. This act of perception is the focus of a considerable body of recent theoretical work.<sup>1</sup>

The impulse to interrogate history, as elucidated by Citron and Renov, is not, in this sense, present in my work. Rather, I am in the grip of a narrative of my own dreaming. Anthropological accounts (Tedlock, Halifax) brought me stories of people who live their life according to their dreams. Taking Jung's

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<sup>1</sup> A useful survey of relevant postmodern positions and their counterarguments can be found in Tony Dowmont's PhD thesis: The Whited Sepulchre. He argues against Scott's problematisation of authorial gaze which, she says, 'establishes a realm of reality outside of discourse' ( Scott, 1992 ). The thrust of her argument is that the casual intimacy of autobiography renders invisible both the political context and discursive nature of experience. She develops this theoretically, via Lacan, to demonstrate that it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience: subjects are constituted discursively, and experience can be best understood as a linguistic event. Experience in this definition becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced.

Dowmont's counter-argument centres on his understanding of the real. He asserts that documentary's central project has always involved 'claiming the real' and asserting its relationship with recording, and interpreting, 'reality'. As Ian Christie points out: "The 'real' is to documentary as God is to theology: if it's not there it doesn't exist". Dowmont concludes with an interesting claim to return to a notion of sincerity in the 'autobiographical pact', drawing on his experience embedded in the practice element of the PhD, and arguing that people are neither wholly produced by historical processes nor reducible to discourse, and do indeed exist independently of the film.

archetypes as a referent, I will explore whether the images I create for the film constitute the symbolism of the collective unconscious. I have chosen to structure my film with a narrative from a dream – that I would die in my 48<sup>th</sup> year. Writing and filming in my 48<sup>th</sup> year, as I am now doing, lends urgency and suspense to both process and the finished film.

The background study into the meaning of death reveals that our knowledge of death is always located in a matrix of belief. Drawing on death as it is understood socio-historically, as in Phillip Aries, psychotherapeutically (the Mindells, Marie de Hennezel, and Jung), medically, (Kubler-Ross, Watts) scientifically (Dawkins, Shaw), shamanically, or personally, (through an experienced loss), I explore the concept of death through the process of making a film that takes my experience and my dreams as the fixed positions of a matrix from which to comprehend death. My aim is that this should resonate with the audience at an unconscious level. As a documentary filmmaker, I make myself available to, and dialogue with these different paradigms. With this multiplicity of meaning comes a filmic opportunity to give equal visual weight to the imaginary, the prophetic, the shamanic and 'everyday' reality.

This dissertation adds to the research field by documenting my process of research and by sharing the decision-making at each stage of my learning how to make this documentary. Most films are made without the opportunity for each stage to be reflexive, and subjected to intellectual scrutiny. My overall aim in submitting this PhD by practice is that the finished film itself - **The Edge of Dreaming** - and the articulation of the creative process in this dissertation will contribute towards the current body of knowledge on documentary language,

knowledge and audience engagement.

## **Research Questions**

My own life and death are the context for my exploration, and my dreams have become the main subject of my own documentary. The first of my research questions rises from this. What sort of film language and structure can I create that gives room to the audience, in a film by and about me – and not only me on screen, me talking, looking, behaving, but also my unconscious, animated and visualized by my camerawork? This is the most intensely personal of endeavors, and my aim is to make it relevant to an audience. Even further, how can I extend the audience's engagement with the film beyond the passive reception that characterizes much television and cinema viewing? This leads me to explore documentary form and audience reception to the film, with the sub-question: can the form of engagement offered by the cinema experience to the audience be extended to provide a place to articulate the audience's reading of the film, and their own experience that they bring to the screening.

The second main area of research is to define what sort of knowledge I obtain by making and showing a documentary about dreams and death. Questions of epistemology are examined from a scientific, spiritual, and film academic perspective, focusing on the subject matter itself, and again on the knowledge produced and shared in the act of making and

screening the film to audiences. In this way the notion of understanding itself is interrogated, leading to the sub-question: is there an unconscious as well as a conscious audience response to the film that I, as director, can identify and engage with? What are the discourses of the unconscious that provide a framework to articulate this response?

These research areas come together through the practice of making the documentary. I have to find a film lexicon and structure flexible enough to give some sense of different sorts of knowing on screen, as well as leaving the audience room to engage with the film as deeply as possible.

The death sentence quality of my dreams and the choice to film in what could have been my final year lend themselves towards the urgency of narrative suspense. The dream and reality require a filmic language which lets me segue from the imaginary to dream to every-day reality. How do I balance narrative with the exploratory in the film? Unlike Luostarinen, I aim for the story to be more compelling than the theme. Like Griffin, Fox and Olin, I am exploring a world that questions my very identity. My aim is that the final film expresses the texture of my subjectivity, and integrates it with a sophisticated conceptual analysis as well as a dramatic narrative premise.

## **Rationale for topic**

The methodology of research is designed in order to learn how to make a film about dying – a particular film about dying. This film was prompted by my mother's death, and my desire to understand the experience I had seen her go through when she died unexpectedly aged 61. Understanding, itself, became a subject of research. What sort of understanding could I achieve by making a film? By reading? By thinking? By experiencing other deaths? By dreaming? After I had the dream where I was told I would die myself in my 48<sup>th</sup> year, a study of prophetic and other dreams became important. My most important research for this PhD by practice, however, was how I could make this enquiry as a film, and the dialogue this could produce between different sorts of knowledge and understanding.

For Renov and Nicholls, the definition of what sort of knowledge can be provided by documentary is a key marker in how documentary has changed the cultural landscape. Although they disagree on how to define what mental states documentary produces, they do not doubt that an audience's experience of documentary can lead to knowledge. For Renov, this knowledge is embedded in a discourse streaked with desire and transgression, where knowing is a multileveled critique and an unverifiable "making sense of multiple differences' "(Renov 2004). Nicholls, conversely, argues that documentary is a socially embedded exposition which foregrounds practical outcome from the new information the audience gain from the film (Nichols 1991). These two

interpretations are useful markers against which I can assess and define the knowledge produced by documentary.

A further layer of reflection arising out of the practice of this PhD is an interrogation into how we talk about film. This was clarified during a 2008 masterclass at Edinburgh College of Art where Niels Pagh Andersen, one of Denmark's most influential and sought after editors, used several examples to discuss documentary form. Although persuaded by his verbal analysis of deep structure and subtext, I disagreed strongly with his interpretation once he showed clips meant to support his thesis. I noticed the eagerness with which I made notes on Andersen's mesmerizing set of insights, or rules. These seemed very attractive, promising, as they did, control over the chaos and formless plurality that of any set of documentary rushes, which surely contain thousands on thousands of films, hundreds at least of which clamour to us, tell me, show me, this is the film you want to make!

In my very eagerness I recognised that I was searching for what might be a mirage - a generalised, objective and absolute 'knowing' about documentary form. The idea of a tool called the 'deep structure' of documentary form, is perhaps more an elegant and useful aid to discussion than a fact-based analysis yielding an objective means of evaluating cinema. My tentative proposition is that films are more mysterious, and less objective. Any definition of knowledge I could endorse would have to accept that the meaning and value and experience of a film does not lie in its narrative, or its form, or its content, or even in any synthesis of all of these, however hypnotically articulated. My proposal is that the value and experience of a

film lies in the individual engagement with it. This seems closer to Renov's position:

It is a window into another space, onto another subjectivity; it is also a mirror in which one sees the self projected, in minute and unflinching detail. (Renov 2004:155)

I returned to my set of rushes, complete with their multiplicity of meaning, their promise of a thousand stories, only this time I interpreted each viewing, each viewer, as producing a different film, with a differently constructed main character, narrative, pleasures found in different places, and different conclusions drawn. It was a conclusion that made my working life more uncomfortable, as it offered no guidance on how to make a 'good' film. On the other hand, it did reinforce my focus on content and engagement with the audience as a necessary part of the definition of creating a documentary film.

## **Understanding through film**

My mother's death, the primary motivator of the filming process, held mysteries for me. I wanted to make meaning of the process I had seen her go through. I chose making an open-ended documentary as the route to help me unravel those mysteries. Both as a viewer of films and a maker, I had had several years of experiencing the sort of understanding watching a film could produce, and the intense research necessary to create a film. I immersed myself in the literature on death and dying, as well as several workshops that offered an experiential perspective. I actively welcomed the self-referential nature of making the film as part of an academic degree, seeing this as an opportunity to clarify the particular

sort of understanding that could be produced by watching, and I hoped, by creating, a film. As Michelle Citron put it, (although her interest was in the interplay between documentary and fiction) film

gives voice to my unconscious, allowing me to have a dialogue between that which I know, and that which I don't even know that I know. (Citron 1999:281)

To engage with this dialogue I needed a language that would include concepts I was unfamiliar with at the outset of this PhD. I grappled with the basic concepts of psycho-analysis and spirituality. In the literature review I refer to the scholars on cinema and the practice and writing on psycho-analysis. I also explore my own and others' scepticism in writings of scientific investigation into spirituality and death. This gave me a useful conceptual context, which assisted me to think through my experiential practice.

I hoped that the process of making the film would be intensely productive of the sort of understanding I desired. I found that my ideas, treatments and scripts were altered by the process of editing. It seemed that transferring ideas, words, described images, to the actual image and actual sound, required a change, in each case, to a different modality. This shift means that I learnt, again, and differently, about my subject area in the cutting room. By creating new alliances of sound and picture, new information, new realisations, new inferences and new connections were drawn.

## **Selection of Research Methods**

This study contains a multi-faceted purpose which is contained and in different ways structured by the central practice of creating a finished film. The research activities with their methods are summarised below.

A first element of my research was to immerse myself in the communities that work with death – nurses, spiritual thinkers, and hospice workers. Using the basic concept of participative observer grounded in visual anthropology, (Malinowski 1993); (Mead 1956); (Estes 1992), I spent several months over the period of my PhD research living, working and learning alongside these communities. During this time, I made a conscious effort to bracket the judgements that arose from my own particular cultural background and teleology, in order to fully accept each respondent's description of what was happening within the community. As my understanding of our shared activities increased, I began to ask questions. This safeguarded 'meaning', as explored in Hockings and Tedlocks' writings on anthropology on film. (Hockings 1995), (Tedlock 2005) and gave me confidence that I understood the subjects of my research much as they themselves would. When I reached the stage of developing my own critique or reflection of what I heard, I made a point of presenting my critique back to the film subjects through discussion or screenings. Any conclusions I began to draw, or connections or comparisons I began to make were noted in my research journal, and tested again as I made the film in the editing process.

## **Activities**

### **Research Journal**

I kept several research rough journals and diaries during the making of the film. I quote from them throughout this thesis. They monitor my growing knowledge about death, my dreams, my scepticism and my schooling in a language that included terms such as spirit and soul. As the PhD progresses, concerns with the subject matter give way to concerns with film-making and with engaging with the audience.

### **Interviews**

I conducted around a hundred hours of interview for the film. As much as possible, I sought to make the interviews informal. I preferred not to give written questions to the subjects in advance of the interview. As I wanted the interviews to have the spontaneity of a conversation, I engaged fully with their views, opening up further possibilities, developing their ideas, pointing out possible disagreements or opposed points of view. I began to realise that these interviews would be unlikely to make it into the final film. Although they were a critical source of information, in fact, perhaps the main source of original information, and by inference, conceptual framework, in this study. However, these interviews as synchronous film set up viewer expectations of an information-led exposition. As my sense of the main narrative and emotional arc of the film evolved, this style of filming did not fit my aims, so they remained a resource for background information.

There were three distinct stages of using interviews during the process of making this PhD by practice. The first was

information gathering. The interviewee was usually seated, and I filmed immediately after introducing myself, in order to have a conversation that had not been rehearsed off camera. This produced the information basis for much of the understanding of death in this thesis. The second use of interviews consisted of follow-up meetings where I would come back to a concept or an experience that I felt needed expanding. Again, these were unrehearsed, and resulted in my understanding of the perspective of, variously, nurses, doctors, shamans, chaplains, and the person facing dying themselves. The third stage of interviews were those I expected to use in the film. These took place during the year of the main filming, (interviews with Professor Irving Weissman and neurologist Mark Solms, and with the shaman Claudia Goncalves, for instance). In these cases I kept the camera hand held, to give a sense of myself behind the camera and to emphasise the actual physical moment of a meeting between two people. My aim was that the people in front of my camera would exist as characters, not just as a source of information. In each case my own contribution, or question is heard, or I myself am visible as the interlocutor. These were filmed as encounters between myself at a certain stage in the narrative unfolding of the year. Thus, they can be defined in dramatic terms, for instance, the interview with Weissman pushes me to further exploration, by asserting and illustrating that dreams “do have something to do with reality.”.

### **Film Scripts and treatments**

I wrote several drafts of voice-overs and script-sequences, treatments and outlines of this film, and several drafts of short films. This creative writing marks stages of my awareness as

well as documenting areas of exploration. This creative stage allowed space for the imaginary, for me to make my own connections and attempt to give form to feelings, fears, hopes, hunches, intuitions. Some were inspired by song, some by a specific experience I had. Some were written to solve a particular moment in the narrative arc I imagined of the finished film. Methodologically, they filled the visual and imaginative shortfall from the sync interviews. In these treatments I began to explore the film language I needed to create the sorts of understanding and meaning that would fulfil my research questions. As Adrienne Rich wrote of poems: “like dreams: in them you put what you don’t know you know”.(Rich 1979:21)

### **Short films**

I created short films for two people who were dying. They were intended for a specific purpose – to ease the dying process of two friends who were terminally ill, Em and Eve. Some were made rapidly, assembled from sequences of talks or workshops that I thought were relevant to their situation. Others were created precisely for the intended person, which include a short film for clients at Milestone, an AIDS hospice. Most of these films were created for a specific audience of one. They are conventional as they were intended to clearly demonstrate information or tell a story. The only criterion for the images was their relevance to the experience of the intended viewer. It was Em’s response – that the film was “better than morphine”, that prompted my interest in exploring how film could engage with its audience. For Em, film was medicine.

## **Workshops Attended**

I attended several workshops over the course of study which offered an increased understanding of death, and its significance to life. These varied in length from one to seven days residential. They were variously open to all, or open to those who had attended preceding workshops. Most were intended for carers. They used a variety of techniques including group psychotherapy, ritual, creative work, shamanic connection, music and dance. Each had a historical background and offered a description of what happens when we die, theoretically, emotionally, physically and spiritually. If they could be said to have an underlying common aim, it was to educate participants in their particular cosmology of death and life and help the participants recognise their own issues and deal with them, so that they could sit with the dying without projecting their own unresolved fears.

I attended as a participant observer, using my training as an observational and anthropological documentary film-maker to both film and take part. As the PhD progressed, and I realised I would be unlikely to use any of the footage thus obtained, I began to take part without the camera, making notes instead. Once I could approximately predict what would be said, I felt I had researched the area sufficiently, and allowed myself a dialogue between the different cosmologies represented, and to reflect back my own judgments and perceptions.

## **Workshops Hosted**

The short films I made for people who were dying, and my research into films that dealt with death, came to the attention of various groups and conferences, and I was invited to run workshops on cinema and what it could yield in the understanding of spirituality.

I ran five workshops during the course of the PhD. Early cuts of **The Edge of Dreaming** were screened, as well as two of the short films I created for my dying friends. These gave me a valuable opportunity to deepen my engagement with audience. I was able to engage in dialogue with the viewers about questions of meaning and understanding – both in terms of how accurately the films were communicating my intentions, and about the levels or categories of understanding produced. The workshops often produced extreme emotional states in the participants.

I felt it was necessary to respond to the emotions elicited by the film, and began to research and develop simple group exercises that allowed participants to work consciously with their response. This yielded new insights for me around death and dying, and the role of fear in imagining that process. As the film progressed, I was able to feed these back into my film, for instance in the section on fear before the shamanic journey. From these workshops I was able to develop new ways of deepening the engagement of the audience for the final film, holding workshops after screening **The Edge of Dreaming** in Greece, Macedonia, Israel, Ireland and the UK.

The research methodology here sits somewhere between the skills of a group psychotherapist, an anthropologist and a reader of audiences. I felt uncertain of my skills in psychotherapy, and began to work with trained counsellors and psychotherapists who could 'hold' the group. This freed me to be more observant of the group process and focus more on the actual film component of the workshops. It was not wholly successful, however. Working with experienced facilitators resulted in a more diffuse group exploration, and replaced the highly focused dialogue I had been able to hold. Working alone, I was able to develop a group journey in a specific direction, resulting in concentrated reflection on the issues in the film, and how they relate to the lives of the audience. The final chapters of this PhD describe the evolution of these workshops and the response from the (limited and self-selected) participant audience.

## **Papers**

These first workshop screenings were introduced and accompanied by hand-outs that I wrote to contextualise the film clips. Although we often developed different discussions at several points in the workshops, the notes represented the results of my own comparative understanding of what I had learnt, and what I had experienced myself. The interplay between the verbal notes, the themes, images, characters or emotions produced by the film clips, and the response from the audience allowed a particularly rich dialogue which expanded and detailed the background of this research.

## Conceptual Analysis

One research method used throughout the study period was to elucidate the conceptual frameworks that underpin the workshops or interviews. This was a catalyst for, and developed through the ensuing research into literature and film. After discovering that each subject area of my research into death came with its own conceptual paradigm, I began to discern comparisons and parallel occurrences between each paradigm. This is developed within the **Reflections on Process** chapter, and the results of the exploration inform **The Edge of Dreaming**. It is most succinctly explored in the treatments for the film, examples from which are detailed in that chapter.

## Film Language

I have watched hundreds of documentaries in the course of this research project. This has immersed me in different forms of documentary language, in differing priorities of storytelling, argument, lyricism, emotionally intimate, distant, self-reflective... the list is endless. Every opportunity to view films (on juries, for distribution, as a programme curator, at festivals) has been seized. I have not spent a great deal of time watching television, although many of the films I have viewed have been screened on television in one country or another. I have gone beyond my comfort zone, both in terms of my preferred subject areas, styles and genre, in order to remain open to unexpected strengths in visual communication. I have searched out animation, in particular, as offering a visual correlative of internal states. I narrowed down my viewing

material only in the last year of research, by subject matter and approach, in order to closely analyse structure and function of the documentary language in films which had resonance with my research project.

## **Methods fit for purpose**

The variety of research methods described above give this research the breadth required as context for what has turned out to be a very personal film rooted in an autobiographical documentary genre. Their multiplicity of reference, and access to expertise in each paradigm, ensure rigorous scrutiny of my considerations and conclusions. The iterative screenings and workshops were an opportunity to test my perceptions and analysis in a public setting. They also allowed a dialogue with groups of varying belief systems, and room for the unexpected.

## **Choice of Film Structure**

I made a choice around half way through the period of research to make my own experience central to the documentary narrative. In the film itself I describe my changing worldview. Integral to this journey is an exchange of ideas, and a testing of concepts, with advocates from other paradigms. As a storyteller, a mother, a logician, an atheist and an artist, I have chosen to base my final output on the three dreams that happened to me in 2006 and that shocked me awake: the first that my horse was about to die; the second that I would die myself in my 48th year; and the third showing me how I would die. My visual focus on changing seasons, the landscape of

my house, my family and animals, allows space for reflection on a dream-induced death sentence.

## **Challenges from a methodological viewpoint**

One methodological challenge I face is that of overwhelming possibility. As research data, everything seems relevant: enormous tracts of thinking on anthropology, science, myth, storytelling, visual culture, biology, grief, loss, metaphor, psycho-analysis, dreams, symbolism of images. On the other hand, there is very little I can film that has the right atmosphere for inclusion into the final film. Interviews create an expectation in the audience that they will be given information, which makes it hard to get their emotional engagement. At the opposite extreme, the drama of filming during what has been foretold to be the last year of my life made it hard to create the discursive freedom to explore these paradigms of knowledge which are, nonetheless, central to the significance of the prophetic dream. The focus of a year in my own life would have been easier if I had been more willing to become the main character, but this is not a straightforward process and the thesis examines this.

These difficulties are also the drivers that produce solutions: a documentary film language where the subjectivity of the main character and director is expressed through family and animals, carrying the film's symbolic resonance. Conceptually, the final film wears its research lightly, expressing the different paradigms through encounters with friends and strangers that owe more to the traditions of picaresque novels than to documentary investigation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FILM-MAKING

Michael Renov describes “the recent outpouring of work by independent film and video artists who evidence an attachment both to the documentary impulse *and to* the complex representation of their own subjectivity”(Renov 2004:109). He sets up a distinction between the modernist impulse and the post-modernist aspirations which question the sense of self in autobiographical film-making:

The new autobiography, far from offering an unself-conscious transcription of the artist's life, posits a subject never exclusive of its other-in-history. In so doing, it challenges certain of our staunchest aesthetic and epistemological preconceptions.

That challenge is made primarily by questioning the representation of the familial subject, and by exploring the manifold potentials of filmic form to create the subject of the autobiographical documentary project. Renov explores the way that various artists have spanned an endeavor that allows a historicized context, and a self that is, as Barthes has put it,

diffracted....a dispersion of energy in which there remains neither a central core nor a structure of meaning: I am not contradictory, I am dispersed. (Barthes:94)

Renov examines the uses to which the new technologies of the internet and digital camera have been put, arguing for film-

making as a new locus of autobiography, taking over from the literary autobiography. It is certainly the case that there has been a proliferation of autobiographical film-making in the last fifteen years, with enough films coming out which examine women's experience to make it almost a genre in itself. It is also true, however, that the market in written familial autobiographies has also increased hugely in the last ten years. There seems an unprecedented public interest in the direct communication about the lives and perceptions of others, seen through their own eyes. This has provided a rich context to examine the subject as film-maker, with his or her own experience as the context /perspective/subject matter of the film. David MacDougall;(McDougall 1998) asks "how can any representation approximate the self that every self knows itself to be?" The autobiographical film **Treyf**, by Alisa Lebov, overtly questions and plays with the political and social and gendered construction of her identity, as does Griffin's *Out of Reach*. McDougall's description of "deep" reflexivity' is a useful concept to apply here to the autobiographical endeavour, as it 'requires us to read the position of the author in the very construction of the work, whatever the external explanations may be'. Unlike Lebov and Griffin, I do not want to bring the construction of myself as character into the foreground: however, the work itself charts the changing positioning of the author, and aims to create considerable space for the audience to 'read' this . As John Corner points out in an article evaluating Renov's contribution to documentary criticism:

A concern with achieving a measure of stability and determinateness through pursuing kinds of self-documentation is now more than ever in tension with the idea that the self is multiple and contradictory. The documented self may gain both its therapeutic and its

public value as much from the vista of unexplored, uninviting and discontinuous territories it opens up as from any coordinates and boundaries it manages to establish in the service of clearer identity. Nevertheless, the idea of self-representation as, in part, a search for the 'essential' inside story will continue to exert its pull. (Corner 2006)

## Case Studies

Two approaches to constructing the self which approximate the above polarities can be found in two autobiographical films: Jennifer Fox's **Flying, Confessions of a Free Woman** (US 2007) and Annie Griffin's **Out of Reach** (UK 1994). Like a literary autobiography, Fox's film is told in chapters, in this case, six, over a total of six hours. It leaves the audience feeling they have been immersed in her world, and that they could see the world from her perspective. Thus it creates a self in Corner's terms that aims to include a 'measure of stability and determinateness'. When I emerged from the film, from her consciousness, I felt a little lost, in the same way I have often found myself disorientated after reading an engrossing autobiography. It's a feeling that sends you to the front of the book again, to re-experience your starting point, to re-experience the first descriptions, this time from the new consciousness, created by the journey you have taken.

Fox used several techniques to bring us into her world. She made a set of rules, such as no lighting, tripod, cameraperson, and that filming would include anyone who remained in the room with her. She produced 1600 hours of footage, arguing that lessening the tension of everyday shooting would produce

the few authentic moments she was looking for. She shared her camera, inviting women to film her in dialogue with them:

I knew if I had a cameraperson observing women talking that they/we would become self-conscious and the very intimacy I wanted to capture would disappear. So I had to find a way to bring the camera into a conversation in a way that would be part of the intimacy, so I came up with this technique which I call "passing the camera." It's very simple: the camera is just passed back and forth in the conversation. There is no filmmaker and subject, we are both equal. ... The camera becomes a tool of intimacy, rather than a tool to record.  
(Fox 2007)

The documentary drive in her film is stated at the outset: "when I want to understand something I make a film about it." Fox is a provocative interrogator of her own and other's realities, and tireless in her quest to relate her own preoccupations with those of other women in other cultures. She films the minutiae of her own life, from her vaginal investigations to her bloke in bed with her, to her naked in the shower, to her friend waking up from a several hour long operation to remove a brain tumour. There is a sense that she has moved the documentary language along: we see intimate images never before seen, but perhaps most importantly, the scale of her work, its relentless focus on her own predicament, draws the world into her own vortex, creating a sustained subjective intensity that has not been seen before.

The film uses many conventions of narrative fiction. It is fast paced, with a strong storyline expressed through its structure and voice-over, and each hour episode ends with a cliff-hanger. Jennifer is on screen more than half of the time. The audience identifies with her as a face, a body, our route into a

life, and her reflections on it.

The film has produced furious on-line debate, some praising her for her honesty, and her innovation in bringing a woman's interior life into the public domain; others criticize her ethically: for instance, her casual admission of having had "four or five abortions". She also presented women who had undergone genital mutilation in Pakistan, Somalia and Cambodia as though their situation was comparable to her own tentative exploration of her adolescent sexuality. She responded by arguing that sexuality was the common thread in all her conversations, and she refuses to disconnect from women in cultures who cannot imagine the freedoms Jennifer enjoys (a particularly memorable scene is the one where she questions Indian woman about masturbation, which becomes a riot of their laughing disbelief). It is more uncomfortable when she connects her own sexual experiences with Somalian women's genital mutilation. She defends her subject matter and her approach:

This is a real life, I'm sick of fake lives being shown. I felt politically that my statement was: for better or worse, this is a real female life. You may hate it, you may think I'm self-involved - I am. You may think I'm confused - I am. But this is actually exposing the inside of one woman's real life and not a fantasy. I will not be ashamed. I will not be ashamed of my sexuality. I will not be ashamed of my abortions. I will not even be ashamed of my married man. I will not be ashamed that I never married or had children.(Estes 1992)

Unfortunately, judging from the on line and press response, as the film continues, many in the audience become less comfortable about identifying with her, or trusting her as their representative. By showing her flippant references to

abortions, her shabby treatment of her boyfriend, her careless acceptance of a married lover, many in the audience stop liking her and lose respect for her perspicacity. I also started to feel uncomfortable with her reflections on the sequences in Cambodia and with the Somalian women. It could simply be that my own response and the more vehement public response reflects on the sanitized and simplified fictional characters that we are accustomed to seeing on our screens. As John and Judith Katz put it:

Private life at the end of the twentieth century is surrounded by a high degree of secrecy... We compare ourselves to myths, not reality....The value of knowing, in more realistic fashion, about other people's interior lives is unquestionable (Katz, Katz 1988)

Michelle Citron goes on to note the revolutionary, political, aspect of showing what she describes in terms of the contradictions and inconsistencies of people's lives, their sexuality and in particular the violence and shame that can be used to silence women's voices:

This is the implicit threat that autobiography poses to the status quo. As a culture we have been little able to tolerate the truth of the variety of lived experience: that truth threatens the social order." (Citron 1999)

Fox's choice to use the lexicon of narrative fiction, i.e. close ups of her thinking, wide-shots of her dancing, walking in New York with a dog, has made her visible to the audience within the lexicon that they are accustomed to seeing the main character in a mainstream fiction. The audience then make a moral judgment about her. Would they have made the same moral judgment were she in their living room, rather than on the screen? Perhaps not – most of my uneasiness was

produced by her voice over reflections. Her encounters within the film with other people were powerful and Jennifer came across as a likeable and entirely honest equal in her desire to share her enquiry with women across the world.

Fox has created a 'self' that is determinable, on screen, articulated and identified within the mainstream fiction lexicon, but she is also pushing the boundaries of the conventional 'self' of fiction. Because Fox aims to be authentic to the confusions of 'the inside of one woman's real life', her attempt to make an identifiable character on screen has produced something more unsettling, less determinable, than her use of the main character conventions would lead us to expect. I would argue that this is an instance of Fox moving the genre forward: whilst using the conventions we expect of creating a main character on screen, her commitment to portraying her authentic experience has resulted in a character that makes us question whether our idea of a 'main character' is itself always poor fiction: a simplified and homogenized being that cannot contain the contradictions of authentic experience.

Far less ambitious in the scope of its investigation, but motivated by a similar drive to interrogate one's own identity is Annie Griffin's **Out of Reach**. Only 26 minutes long, this film has a clarity of technique that allows it to scrutinize how identity is constructed within the family. Composed entirely of questions to her family about herself "(how much do I earn? Am I beautiful? Do you think about me every day?"), it creates a sense of the interlocutor in a highly original way. The audience must imagine the questioner, as they are denied access to her image until the very end. Like Fox, Griffin is provocative. Her questions are playful, even slightly

transgressive, and their rapid-fire delivery gives the whole film a sense of urgency. There is much less of a narrative hook pulling us through the exposition: rather, we are constantly entertained in the present, with modifications to the way the questions are asked (by telephone, in the form of a multi-choice series). The finale, which shows the filmmaker/subject for the first time in a highly staged tableaux where she poses with her parents in a glamorous red dress, before chasing a disappearing plane down a runway, changes the form of the documentary, and is perhaps the least successful part of the film.

**Out of Reach** brings us back to Renov's explorations of film as an autobiographical form. Beyond the narrative convention of Fox, Griffin's film puts an identity on the screen that is fractured, multiple, and cannot be expressed in a single voice. Because Fox's identity is always visible, unified as both a visible and a consistent auditory presence, her identity invites identification (and judgment) in the tradition of conventional narrative fiction films. Griffin saw the focus of her film as neither about her family nor herself, but about the dynamic between them, "It's not a question of me or them being the focus, more the looks that pass between people who've grown up together – the drama of the family"(Griffin 2007). She felt she was asking questions on behalf of the viewer – the questions you have never dared to ask growing up. The intention to focus the questions solely on herself was kept secret from the family until the moment of filming. She was interested in the "way people who know you very well, or think they do, look at you and sharing that with the viewer."

## Death in Film

Griffin's interest in constructing a reality from multiple points of view, and her creation of the filmic act for an audience, are useful references for my own film. Death appears in my film as literal, filmable reality, and as a spectre, a potential death sentence, a potential psychic metaphor, as an entry into an exploration of family and epistemology. Michael Renov is fascinated by the place of death in film. He quotes Barthes approvingly when he says that "Death is something like the special calling of the camera arts." However, Renov appreciates that investigating death in film is not simple: "such an investigation brings us up hard against the limits of documentary discourse, to the very conditions of its (im)possibility." (Renov 2004:121)

What does Renov mean by the limits of documentary discourse? He notes that death is the unrepresentable nothing. To document the void of death, he quotes the hole burnt in the film the **Day After Trinity** by the Hiroshima blast (directed by Jon Else). Death of the self destroys the possibility of signification, therefore how can it be made the subject of a documentary? This view is held in tension with the possibility, following Jean Rouché, that the camera can be used as a "psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn't otherwise do"(Levin 1971) and which can be part of an exploration that allows healthy mourning. Renov gives a textual interpretation of **Shoah** to explain the way that film can both show the gestures and process of eliciting traumatic memories, and begin a potentially therapeutic process of at the very least, function as a work of mourning. Thus the "representation of death in some recent films and videotapes

may constitute both a public and an autobiographical or intrapsychic activity” (Renov 2004:125)

But he warns, this subject-matter is not only difficult formally, but is fraught with dangers in terms of audience response:

With this work, every choice is a dangerous one as regards audience response. Deep and painful identifications can arise; a gamut of emotions can be elicited, including anger directed at the filmmaker for her presumed insensitivity, exploitativeness, or narcissism. One person’s cathartic experience can be another’s exhibitionist display. (Renov 2004:126)

This is a useful warning. Audience response is integral to my research aim. It will be important to give sufficient time to audience feedback, and to develop a means of engaging with audiences that allows them to express their ethical as well as their aesthetic response.

## **Autobiographical Strategies**

Subjectivity on screen is also explored in **My Body**, Margrethe Olin, Norway. Again, she aims to question the creation of identity through filmic means. Like Fox, she appears on screen, but, unlike Fox, her appearance is itself held up as the subject of visual enquiry, and the filmic process is constantly referred to. Like Griffin, this is film subjectivity explored cinematically, structurally as well as through a voice-over. The film plays between categories at a dizzying speed. Like a sleight-of-hand performance, the audience is told to look one way while the real action takes place elsewhere. The film

opens with cuts between fiction, animation, home-movie and documentary, between present and past, between synchronous and non synchronous footage. The crossing of categories is heightened by the interplay between sound and vision, between the audience addressed directly, and the protagonist addressed by a man.

It is a brilliant opening, breath-taking in its rapid leaping across categories, reminiscent of riddles and with the underlying structure of jokes. The film begins with 35mm leader from Universal Studios. It moves into scratched leader (probably 16mm), and then into black as the audience is addressed with admonitions to “drop your shoulders”. This is intercut with the voice of a man who is speaking in heavily accented English telling, we imagine, our protagonist further instructions concerning the body – breathing, postural. To relax.

We are being told to change things we can change about our body. The importance of this will quickly become clear. The woman’s voice comes back to address the audience, after repeating his injunction to us to relax, she admonishes us: “but don’t close your eyes. Because you are at the movies” The image is a big close up of eyes shut.

She continues: “Because you’re here to wake up. You’ll hear a story I thought I’d never tell”. Their eyes on the screen open, and are followed by a close up of a mouth. The protagonist’s mouth, not synced to the sound. The story she will tell is about the things that cannot be changed about her body.

All of this takes place in the first minute and 42 seconds. The whole film could be described as the visual equivalent of

anecdote. Like Fox, Olin has found a mode of story telling that is as fluent and conceptually free as telling a story about your day to your friends. It is informal, personal, can be slanted to comedy or pathos, uses reported speech, acts out central events, engages the audience's attention and solicits their involvement. *Anec/dote* comes from the Greek. *Anec* means private, *dote* means public, to make public, and possibly shares a root with *doter* to give.

In the scientific paradigm, anecdotes are seen as inconsequential, unreliable, short narratives that occupy a small space of meaning, and are incapable of depth. They share this trivialisation with folk tales, superstitions, 'old wives tales'. They come from an oral, rather than a written tradition. They are a good vehicle for reflecting on an experience, for telling jokes /soliciting sympathy - in short to bring the viewer into your world. The anecdote can be entertaining. It is one of the oldest forms of communication, and, now that the technology has made the camera, stock, editing, lightweight, and easily carried around, like a diary or sketchpad, the structure of anecdote can re-appear in the form of autobiographical filmmaking. Particularly when it is documentary autobiography, the processes of making take place in the private arenas of life, where anecdote has traditionally flourished.

## **Dreams and Film**

Anecdote is also used to tell dreams. Films that depict dreams are more normally found in fiction or animation than documentary. ***My Love*** (Russian: Моя любовь, *Moya lyubov*)

is a 2006 paint-on-glass-animated short film directed by Aleksandr Petrov. Based on *A Love Story* (1927) by Ivan Shmelyov, it uses an impressionist painting technique that purposely fails to distinguish dream from either reality, or from waking fantasy. It gives access to the character's inner thoughts, placing the dreams, fears and experiences on an equal level of importance. Accused by some critics of being sentimental, it has equally attracted international audience prizes for its access to the contradictory inner processes of a sixteen year old boy in the throes of determining what sort of man he will become.

Films often have the structure of dreams: their cuts, changing personas, landscapes, focus on the tiny and the immense. Bunuel says:

A film is like an involuntary imitation of a dream...On the screen, as within the human being, the nocturnal voyage into the unconscious begins. (Hauke and Alister 2001)

## Films On Death

Far from being taboo, as 21<sup>st</sup> century death is often described, death is familiar territory for documentaries. Wiseman's **Near Death**, and **Silverlake County: the View from Here**, about the film-maker's own death, are documentaries that attempt to observe the impact of death within a mainly observational approach. In 2007 five out of eleven short documentaries short-listed for the Soho Shorts Film Festival took death, or

funerals, (of a father, a friend, their own) as their subject matter.

Death can be conveyed through the language of television, and some important television films have been produced which have made their way into public consciousness: (**Death on Request** 1995, **Life After Death** 2006, **Malcolm and Barbara, Love's Farewell**, 2007). The last film, by Paul Watson, was taken by some critics as evidence that documentary is no longer to be trusted, since the film suggests that Malcolm dies on screen. In fact, Malcolm slipped into a coma, and died a day later. The fact that critics and television were made to apologise for having apparently agreed to show death on the screen does remind us of how sacred the moment of life leaving still is, and how its actual or purported visibility on screen touches a raw nerve in the British public.

**Phantom Limb** (Jay Rosenblatt) is notable for constructing a filmic language to talk about death. Based on his feelings of shame and grief after his little brother died, Rosenblatt's formally inventive short documentary is divided into 12 sections. Most sections use a combination of interview and archive black and white film footage. The highly emotional, confessional story of his feelings about his little brother, and the effect his death had on their family, is told through pithy title cards, white on black. He makes use of verbal and visual metaphors, exploring what it would mean to take them literally, as in the scene of a leg amputation in section 9: 'Missing'. The variation of images and the number of sections combine to distance the viewer from his experience, and allow a meditative, metaphoric stance taken to the central story of the death.

Unlike Renov's monograph on film and death, **Shoah**, or **Phantom Limb**, or **Life After Death**, my primary preoccupation is not loss or mourning, or the ethical issues around euthanasia, (Modern Times' **Death on Request**) but using my dreams of death as a means to explore spirituality and identity.

**The Face of Death** by Kiti Luostarinen is very close to my concerns. This 52 minute Finnish documentary, screened on cinemas and television, was motivated by the director's fear of death after the death of her mother. She states at the outset that she wants to see death from the point of view of a dying person. Like Fox, Griffin and Olin, this is first person filmmaking, where the director is the main character, a point of reference who can bring diverse characters together. She reflects on death throughout the film, usually after a moment's interview to camera from one of the hospice patients. We also follow people in the hospice, and focus on the story of one young woman who organizes her own funeral ahead of time. Luostarinen spent several months in the hospice, getting to know the people who were facing death. A visual, playful motif is the skeleton that accompanies her, reading, bicycling, swimming. She also films her son, talking about his grandmother's death as they construct a model tin skeleton. She uses a diary, written in longhand with a fountain pen, whose pages are superimposed with images from her work in the hospice.

The director is motivated by similar thematic concerns to my own. Her research process also shares certain fundamentals: I also worked in a hospice, I also filmed my children's response

to death. I also use voice-over to reflect my experiences and structure the narrative of the film. Her opening sequence, of small children preparing a dead hamster for burial, is so similar to my experience and expression that it could be in my film. But this is where the similarity in film language ends. The camerawork, (which won the Resource Prize in Finland in 2003) is measured, sumptuously lit, and formal. The carefully set up shots, the studio portrait of the director/character, the theatrical motif of an actual life size skeleton aping her movements, ask that the viewer maintain a distance to the subject filmed. This is reinforced by the tense of the film – although the voice-over is in the present tense, the film plays out in the past tense, we get the sense that these events have happened, and now we are considering them. She used an actress to read her voice-over, in a neutral tone. She reduces our emotional identification with her situation, or the situation of the patients in the hospice. We are not allowed to get to know anyone.

This is a brave and deliberate strategy to maintain the viewer's interest at an intellectual, thematic level. It functions to raise the significance of the director's 'findings' on death. We are asked to judge the film by our acceptance of her hard-won realizations, and question ourselves as the director does: "It's hard to accept how powerless we are." "In the presence of death you start taking stock of your life. How consciously am I treading the path to death?"

Director and editor set out to frustrate the viewer's urges towards grieving and empathy. The editor explains:

The aim was to get the viewer to reflect on his or her own mortality. We didn't want to give the viewer a chance to get distracted by feelings of pity. We had to drop sequences that made us feel very tearful, such as grieving relatives and funerals. In a way we didn't want to let the viewer grieve and to think that dying is something that happens to the people in the film but not to themselves. The director-character was meant to be a model for the viewer in facing mortality. (Mehtonen 2004)

**The Face of Death** was designed to encourage a thematic, intellectual response to the subject. "We knowingly try to make a different agreement with the viewer than he wants to make with us. The director/character is not meant to be identified with". (Mehtonen 2004:14) This is a brave and uncompromising approach to a subject that can easily become bathetic.

However, author Yann Martel says of storytelling that

the foundation of a story is an emotional foundation. If a story does not work emotionally, it does not work at all....But a story must also stimulate the mind if it does not want to fade from memory. Intellect rooted in emotion, emotion structured by intellect.  
(Martel 2004: ix)

I too wanted to make a piece of film that encourages the viewer to reflect on death. I was also interested in frustrating their attempts to identify with me. However, my desired relationship with the audience was markedly different. I set out to engage them emotionally, and I wanted to engage their unconscious as well as their conscious attention. I did not want to articulate my generalizations on death: my aim was that the audience produce any realizations about the significance of

death *themselves*. The vibrancy and unrehearsed quality of the home-movie footage corresponded to a sense of life in the film, and the audience must take these contradictions and make their own sense of them.

Don Frederikson's description of 'symbolic cinema' from a Jungian perspective seems to refer to the audience engagement and richness of allusion to which I aspire. Frederikson defines Jung's concept of symbol in cinematic terms as an image bearing infinitely resonant meaning. (Hauke and Alister 2001) His analysis focuses on the meaning he finds in cinema, and was motivated by a desire to find a satisfactory scholarly understanding that does justice to the "power of certain images" (Hauke and Alister 2001:17) that he thinks are insufficiently articulated by what he describes as the reductive semiotics of contemporary film studies. Frederiksen's key concept is built from Jung's distinction between sign and symbol: a sign is an 'expression that stands for a known thing' (Hauke and Alister 2001:18), whereas a symbol remains more than its definition. He quotes Jung:

The symbol is alive only as long as it is pregnant with meaning...Whether a thing is a symbol or not depends chiefly upon the attitude of the observing consciousness; for instance, on whether it regards a given fact not merely as such but also as an expression, for something unknown...There are undoubtedly products whose symbolic character does not depend merely on the attitude of the observing consciousness, but manifests itself spontaneously in the symbolic effect they would have on the observer. Such products are so constituted that they would lack any kind of meaning were not a symbolic one conceded to them.(Jung et al 1958: Vol 6: paras 814 - 818)

The definition of the cinematic image as symbol depends, therefore, on the viewer's response. The same image could be a symbol for one person and a sign for another. If it is perceived as a symbol it is because it is "the best possible description or formulation of relatively unknown fact which is nonetheless known to exist or is postulated as existing" and is alive "only so long as it is pregnant with meaning". Frederiksen goes on to further define an image as symbolic only if it can be amplified to invoke the resonance the image has for the viewer, 'the feeling tone...and magic and meaning" (Hauke and Alister 2001:24). This amplification can occur because some images link to Jung's notion of the 'objective psyche' or 'collective unconscious', defined by Frederiksen as "transpersonal factors that predate ego-consciousness itself" (Hauke and Alister 2001:28) He goes on to explain:

When psychic expressions such as dreams, fantasies and works of art are in touch with the objective psyche they have fairly universal characteristics: they can exert an extraordinary fascination upon consciousness, but for reasons that transcend strictly personal associations. They are impersonal and frequently nonhuman; often they are abstract, e.g. circular or quadripartite. In the case of dreams and fantasies, they come from within us, but strike us as having a life of their own. When they occur, they do so spontaneously, outside the powers of the conscious will. They carry large amounts of energy and have an energising effect. These several qualities of the symbol make our symbolic experiences numinous. And they indicate a psychic reality to which each person potentially has access, but which transcends the bounds of personal history.

Jung defined the archetype as a main source of the symbolic richness of certain images or stories. Archetypes are "an irrepresentable, unconscious, pre-existent form that seems to

be part of the inherited structure of the psyche” (Jung 1958: Vol. 10: para 847)

Frederikson gives examples of documentaries that he thinks can be read as symbolic cinema. They are not limited to story, or fiction. One of these is **Forest of Bliss**, a visual essay by Robert Gardner. Made in ten weeks in 1985, and then discussed several years after completion by anthropologist collaborator Akos Ostor and camera/director Robert Gardner for the Harvard Film Archive series ‘Voices and Visions in Film’ in 2001, both the writing and the film itself exemplify some of the key elements in Frederikson’s definition of symbolic cinema.

The first is the intensity of the viewer’s experience, which is created by a variety of strategies that clarify the viewer’s focus, by stripping away familiar elements such as a music track, subtitles, voice-over, place names, and the recurrent use of particularly redolent images.

Sound is remarkable in *Forest of Bliss*: the footpads of the purposeful dog running, the arrhythmia of the wood hammering, the desperate pleas of the dog having its ear torn off in the dog fight, which is heard just before the opening quotation:

everything in the world is eat or be eaten. The seed is  
the food and the fire is the eater

WB Yeats.

The lack of a music soundtrack heightens the pace and allegorical resonance of the sounds we are allowed to hear: the oarlocks, the wood breaking, the footsteps.

The notional structuring principle of this film is a day in Benares. The film begins as dawn breaks, bells signal the beginning of the day proper and are rung again to end the day in prayer, and the river is transformed into a place of night and fire, before the epilogue of next morning, which begins again with prayer. The mood is contemplative at the start, and no recognizable processes are portrayed. The audience are a little scared, in awe of the beauty: ears and eyes straining for the information we need to make meaning. That information is withheld, and the audience are forced to remain uncertain of the significance of what is seen and heard, focussing only on how the camera lens and microphone have entered a place where ritual and blessing, life and death, the mundane and the extraordinary are brought to attention in sharp juxtaposition—the snoring smoker being massaged as he sleeps and woken for a cup of coffee. Flowers are picked and delivered. The enormous organic curved bulks of wood are loaded onto slender backs and thrown down and the water's edge. A corpse on the water shocks. It has been prefigured by an early flash, half-seen, of a dog eating a corpse .

Information is withheld and strategies are used, like the magician's misdirection: it seems a dead body being prepared for funeral. When 'the body' waves her hand I had a visceral shock. It made me realize how differently we look at the dead and the living. The group who are making music and incanting over the prone figures, move on. The shot of the empty courtyard is held to encourage contemplation, and the earlier shock is magnified as the film cuts to a mass of bloody flesh eaten by a dog in the foreground of the wide, gently rippling river, with the sounds of the flesh-breaking magnified. Bringing

the flesh and the spirit together so intensely sharpens our attention.

The vertical layout of the waterfront offers the viewer the kind of intrigue of those tenements during demolition which have one vertical wall removed. Layers of life are stacked on top of each other with different activities shown in three stepped layers, and later developed as the activities breach the horizontals, signalled by a man whose spinning bobbin drops below his terrace into the street level. It is hard not to see a connection with levels of consciousness.

Animals and birds are in almost every shot. Dogs eat, defecate, fight, goats are seen as shadows, a dead donkey is dragged down the steps. A buffalo contemplates the river with its fresh dropping in the foreground. Graceful unhurried cows push pedestrians aside and eat the ubiquitous sacred marigolds. Buzzards wheel and caged songbirds are carried from place to place. Monkeys arrive in the film after the burials, playful, naughty, stealing marigolds and swinging from the bell ropes as the ritual moves on below.

.A mysterious large boat is rowed with tremendous muscular energy – we don't know where or why. A large square set of scales hovers empty, and drops, full. These are the elements that seem to carry most symbolic meaning. A beautiful shot of the prow of the boat is immediately contrasted with a busy street scene. After an hour what could be described as the main 'action' of the film takes place: the funeral pyre is built and a body cremated. It is framed from the perspective of the boat, with the boats curved open interior in the foreground. The

gentle swell of the current make the prow rise and fall, like ribs over lungs, as though it is alive, and breathing.

A wailing man is comforted and held. There is a sense of release after the human bodies are disposed of – by fire and by water. A boy plays with a kite, although two dogs remain circling and snarling. Gardens are watered. Girls play hopscotch. Meanwhile the boat continues, the oar lapping through the water, pushed by an unseen hand.

What is it that make these images symbolic? Frederikson's definition goes to the heart of Jung's disagreement with Freud. The amplification of the image, its resonance with the viewer, mean that it cannot be reduced to being a sign. Freud's seminal work, **The Interpretation of Dreams**, set out a way of interpreting dreams that distinguished between their manifest and their latent content. His most famous examples are those where the dreamer has an impulse of which he or she is ashamed, such as an incest dream of the mother, and the manifest content of the dream 'disguises' this uncomfortable urge. The job of the therapist is to bring the supposedly shameful urge to light, to reveal the manifest content as a mere 'cover'. Jung's argument against Freud was that such analysis should then stop the dreams, and reconcile the dreamer to their secret urges. As Jung pointed out, this did not happen, and the dreams carried on to plague the dreamer. Jung described a dream labelled incestuous by Freud as a symbol of the psyche's urge to psychic rebirth. The manifest content in the dream was a symbol, a way of getting in touch with the nourishing creative matrix, produced by "a voice stronger than our own, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking." (Jung 1958: 129)

This idea of access to a creative matrix that produces archetypes, even forms, has a long history in poetry, although less recognised in film. Poet film-makers, such as James Broughton, recognise it when they say:

Honour your dreams. The Gods visit you in your dreams. C. G. Jung carved over his front door: 'The gods are always present, even if uninvited.'

Love your dreams! Expand your dreams!

(Broughton 1977)

Two contemporary films may make this concept clearer. In the Finnish *Steam of Life* (2010), by Joonas Berghäll & Mika Hotakainen, there is a sequence where two men, seen in the distance, row themselves across a lake. Their dialogues is tinged with passion and strangeness. As they arrive at their destination, and begin to collect wood, set a fire, and disrobe. They are two men with Down's syndrome. Like *Forest of Bliss*, the sound of the rowlocks has intensified the sense of the boat crossing the water. Since Frederikson has defined symbolic cinema as necessarily including the audience's subjective response, I can say that I found myself emotionally moved by the vulnerability and courage, the poetry in the conversation and the kindness these two men showed each other. It is a sequence that haunts me.

By comparison, a recent television film by the erudite and thoughtful David Malone, **The Secret Life of Waves** for BBC (2011) was not, I would argue, symbolic cinema, even although it was dealing with similar images and made a profoundly interesting series of connections. Malone showed how a wave is not made of water, but of energy, and when that

energy hits the beach, it has to continue – into surf, splash and sound. He drew a powerful parallel with human beings, whose lives, he said, are propelled by energy until it reaches the end of cellular duplication, and so they die. What made this moving, was footage of his gravely ill mother gazing out to sea on the beach where he had spent his childhood. She died during the making of the film, and we were told this theory of human life as wave process, whilst we saw images of her and of the sea.

Why would I argue this is not symbolic cinema? Malone's mother was being used to illustrate an idea. She was presented in the film as representative of the human condition. Tony Dowmont puts it well when he describes how he felt as a participant in a BBC documentary about sons and mothers:

I felt misrepresented just by the fact of standing in for others, as a 'representative' of a 'group' or 'classification'.... This is of course a classic way in which documentary uses its 'social actors', and David MacDougall comments on the 'sense of betrayal' this sometimes engenders: 'The person seems devoured by his or her attributes as a "subject", finally becoming no more than the incarnation of them' (MacDougall 1998: 45)

(Dowmont 2010: 147)

I would argue that to make cinema symbolic, the images and the sound, the sequences and the structure of the film cannot be fully explained and cannot be reduced to an illustration of an argument, however profoundly interesting. Symbolic cinema is produced by and of the collective unconscious, where images occur that seem to carry and generate energy. They stay with the viewer, and the viewer feels a personal, individual connection with them. This sounds mysterious, but this

mystery is what distinguishes journalism from cinema: Bunuel knew this very well:

The essential element in any work of art is mystery, and generally this is lacking in films... The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply. Yet it is almost never used to do this. (Kyrrou, 1963)

If this is done so rarely in fiction, it is done hardly at all in documentary. I read Bunuel's comment as a challenge: can a documentary, especially a documentary committed to accurate observation of a year in my life, produce cinema which connects with the audience's unconscious? This was a new sub-question taking my research away from rational discourse where what cannot be fully articulated is lost to theoretical explication. But the challenge remained – could I produce images that would connect with the audience's unconscious? The images would then be 'symbolic', using the term as described by Jung and Frederiksen. Of course, setting out consciously, to create a piece of symbolic cinema must be a contradiction in terms. This is a tension I held throughout the period of editing. Creating symbolic cinema could be an aim, but it is an aim that I had to let go of, if I wanted to achieve it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

I set the scope of my review out-with my own immediate cultural and historical context, in order to expand my sense of how we position our lives in relation to our deaths. I was presented with a bewildering array of relevant literary material. Death is one of the great topics, from the earliest written accounts such as the *Iliad* in the ninth century BC, to the most contemporary of blogs (351,000,000 Google entries for death in 2010). I begin my review with Philip Ariès in his cultural analysis of death through the last eleven centuries. Even within this period, there have been huge shifts in what constitutes a 'good' death, and the place of death within society at large. This literature review leads to a further, more abstract discussion, showing how death and dreams can be seen as a key to unlock the epistemology often buried under the writing. Teasing out these epistemological differences is an important part of my understanding of my own situation, as a rationalist dealing with dreams that were proven correct. This chapter is structured, therefore, to clarify my own thinking on what can constitute knowledge, as well as to carry out research into dreams and death. It also grounds the creative process of making the practice element of the PhD.

## Medieval Death

Historian Philip Aries, describes death in the Western world from the medieval times to the present (Ariès 1976). In his section on 'tamed death' (tenth to twelfth century), Ariès describes how the men in the oldest romances faced death. The knights in Malory's **Morte d'Arthur** saw death as an event, often a conscious event, on the battlefield, with sense of script – "I am dying. This is my last hour". Death was a chapter, or at least a page, in life. It was a public event, set with ritual and indeed protocol: Ariès says the best analysis of this attitude is in Solzhenitsyn:

They didn't stall squaring things away, they prepared themselves quietly and in good time, deciding who should have the mare, who the foal...And they departed easily, as if they were just moving into a new house.

(Solzhenitsyn, 1971)

There seemed a conscious desire to make the last page a good one. The endeavour to position death in life, to become conscious of it, was reflected in architecture, in prayer, in the co-existence of the living and dead. This found its most striking expression in the ossuaries, in which skull and limb bones were used as architecture and ornament.

From this sense of one's destiny as an inevitable public event, Aries charts a shift to a "more personal, more inner feeling about death, about the death of the self." This was followed by the Victorian era, where he describes death as becoming eloquent, whether exalted or to be railed against. Since the Industrial Revolution and the leap in medical science over the last 100 years, Aries suggests we currently avoid death: "really, at heart we feel we are non-mortals" (Ariès 1976:106).

## Death in the Twentieth Century

Ariès argues that this avoidance of death, although its roots lie in the desire to spare the dead person's feelings, is accelerating as our twenty first century deaths take place in hospital.

An acceptable death is a death which can be accepted or tolerated by the survivors. It has its antithesis: "the embarrassingly graceless dying" which embarrasses the survivors because it causes too strong an emotion to burst forth; and emotions must be avoided both in the hospital and everywhere in society. (Ariès 1976:89)

Marie de Hennezel would agree. Writing about her work as a psychologist in a hospital for the terminally ill in Paris in the 1980s, she opens the book with a challenge:

We hide death as if it were shameful and dirty...In a world that believes a 'good death' to be abrupt – if possible, unconscious, or at least fast, so as to cause the least upset to the survivors – I believe that an act of witness to the preciousness of these last moments of life and to the extraordinary privilege of being able to share them has some value...I would like to show how the last interval before death can also be the culmination of the shaping of a human being, even as it transforms everyone else involved  
(Hennezel 1997: xiv)

Hennezel's account is constructed of narratives of people's lives, linked by her own conversations and her skills to listen. She is asked the question: does one die the way one has lived?

I have no answer. At the threshold of death, I have seen believers lose their faith and unbelievers discover faith for the first time.....The most beautiful death I ever witnessed was that of a young girl, a twenty-five-year-old drug addict.

She remembers how the daughter drank champagne with the prostitute mother who had abandoned her, and who said to Marie Hennezel the next day: "I'm going to die" as she pulled out the oxygen tubes that were functioning as her lungs.

She seemed to be pushing down on her legs, as if she were giving birth. What came into my mind was Michel de M'Uzan's (French doctor and Freudian psychoanalyst) phrase about the spiritual labour that goes on inside every dying person "an effort to give birth to oneself completely before leaving". Now for the first time, the expression corresponded to something absolutely real. This young woman, who had had such struggles with her life, was now birthing herself into a new world. I was filled with an emotion I cannot describe, part tenderness, part awe. (Hennezel 1997: 180).

This link between death and birth reminded me of my mother's death. The struggle in the body, the sense of an unfolding process, with an outcome, seemed shockingly familiar, but from my experience of giving birth. When I interviewed Fiona Clark, a nurse who was mainly based in a geriatric ward, although training to be a midwife, she began by saying: "death... it's a lot like birth...something coming in to the world at one end, and leaving, at the other". (Clark, 2004)

## **Death and Medicine**

This link is also articulated by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a doctor and psychiatrist. Kübler-Ross reiterates Ariès and Hennezel's

concern that hospitals have made “dying more gruesome in many ways, namely, more lonely, mechanical and dehumanized” Kübler-Ross 1970:21). She talked extensively to dying patients, bringing them into to a class at the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1965. This was revolutionary at the time, and the hospital staff asked if she did not think it cruel to admit to people that they were dying, referring to the medical group as ‘vultures’ (Kübler-Ross 1970:252)

These interviews with the dying, which went on weekly for two and a half years, convinced her that patients’ wellbeing required the opportunity to talk about their impending death, and that medical staff required training in how to facilitate that dialogue. She systematised the patient response to a terminal diagnosis: all patients, she observed, went through stages of shock; denial, anger, depression; bargaining; preparatory grief and acceptance, and finally decathexis. Decathexis is the withdrawal from involvement in the world around the patient, even family and loved ones.

It is the signal of imminent death and has allowed us to predict the oncoming death in several patients where there was little or no indication for it from a medical point of view. The patient responds to *an intrinsic signal system* which tells him of his impending death....When our patients reached the stage of acceptance and final decathexis, interference from outside was regarded as the greatest turmoil and prevented several patients from dying in peace and dignity. (Kübler-Ross 1970:266)

After the first shock of the diagnosis, hope remained with the patient, and was a key element in their ability to come to terms with their own death. Kübler-Ross’ aim was to make the knowledge of death an integral part of life. She became hugely influential in developing the hospice movement:

Was it Montaigne who said death is just a moment when dying ends? ... we should develop societies for dealing with the questions of death and dying, to encourage a dialogue on this topic and help people to live less fearfully until they die. (Kübler-Ross 1970:268)

She went on to create international workshops to train people in dealing with dying patients: "it has been our life's work to help our patients view a terminal illness not as a destructive, negative force, but as one of the windstorms in life that will enhance their own inner growth." (Kübler-Ross, Warshaw, 1978:12)

## **Death and Mysticism**

Kübler-Ross had done relief work in the concentration camp in Maidanek, Poland, at the end of the Second World War, and her life can be seen as a response to the question she put to herself there: "What can an individual human being contribute in the raising of the next generation to prevent more Hitlers, to create a generation with more genuine love and less destructive force?" (Kübler-Ross 1970:18) The next decades were spent working with patients as teachers, and teaching groups herself, in order to describe and understand that inner growth, articulating a context and a lexicon that allowed her to communicate with the dying, including and perhaps especially, children. She began to use the language of psycho-analysis: "It is important that at all times we be in touch with our own feelings and our own projections, so that we can help and serve the patient and not our own needs." (Kübler-Ross 1970:25)

Once she had explored psycho-analysis, Kübler-Ross moved towards a mystic perspective on death. Her own mystic experiences began with a Mrs Schwarz who came back from the dead to encourage Kübler-Ross to continue her work on death and dying (Kübler-Ross 1977:177) Elizabeth responded first as a scientist: "I decided to ask for proof that she was really there by giving her a pen and a sheet of paper and asking her to compose a brief note for the Reverend Gaines. She scribbled a quick thank-you". Kübler-Ross knew that her acceptance of 'mysticism' would undermine her standing the medical and scientific community, but argued that they produced a particular kind of knowing:

if you are not ready for mystical experiences, you will never believe them. But if you are open, then you not only have them, and believe in them; people can hang you by your thumbnails and you will know that the experiences are absolutely real. (Kübler-Ross 1977:178)

She continued to test her own experiences in as scientific a manner as possible: she submitted to Robert Munroe's laboratory to test out-of-body experiences, after which she had a night where she relived the pain and emotions of every one of the deaths she had witnessed. She referred later to this night as a transformation of herself to energy. Her workshops focused on personal growth:

People got rid of their unfinished business, all the rage and anger they experienced in life, and learned how to lives as if they were ready to die at any age...Death is nothing to fear. In fact, it can be the most incredible experience of your life. It just depends on how you live your life now. (Kübler-Ross 1977:223)

## **'Knowing' Death**

One of her students was Phyllida Templeton, (now Anam-Aire) who spent several years with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in the US and in Europe. Anam-Aire continues to run workshops around death and dying, and has written a book which develops Kübler-Ross's teachings into Phyllida Anam-Aire's own context of Celtic spirituality (Anam-Aire, 2005). Anam-Aire has been interviewed extensively for this PhD by practice, from 2003 through to 2007.

Anam-Aire brings her own knowledge of Celtic history and practice, referring to the Goddess Brigit, and the icon of the cauldron as a holding of opposites and the wisdom of their synergy. Death is to be anticipated "as a great journey, a great adventure into the vastness of our own nature, into the earth of our self." (Anam-Aire 2005:23). The book defines a cosmology through reference to Celtic myth, to Anam-Aire's own experiences with the dying, and with her spirit helpers. She thinks that death can only properly be understood as a part of this cosmology that includes its own epistemological reference.

Anam-Aire developed Kübler-Ross's description of an intense 'knowing' but does not subject herself to scientific enquiry. Indeed Anam-Aire defines this knowledge so that it cannot be scientifically verified:

The Celts called it *fios*, i.e. to know without the help of external data – what we today call intuitive knowing from the soul's remembering. (Anam-Aire 2005: 31)

Alongside this is a different sense of time: "In spirit world or Tir-na-Og, everything happens in the great Now where past and

future unite to form the great all-pervading presence." (Anam-Aire 2005: 31)

This other sense of knowing is an elusive concept that both creates difficulties and opportunities in terms of storytelling. Since Anam-Maire defines this knowing as outside consensus time and empirical evidence, it cannot be tested within our frame of commonly accepted verifiable knowledge, it has to be understood from the inside. The relevant measures of validation are those of internal coherence and their impact on the individual who accepts or rejects it. It has this in common with all the great cosmologies including the scientific and psycho-analytic and economic paradigms. There are logical difficulties in using any one of the evaluative methods contained in each cosmology to assess information in the others, as they do not accept each other's criteria of logic or normative values. What counts as evidence, or as an acceptable source of knowledge, is different for each.

## **Belief Systems**

Studying Kübler-Ross and Anam-Aire emphasised that the study of death was bound up in a belief system. It became clear that it is not possible to think, or reflect on death, without accepting that the thinking was taking place in a particular belief system. A useful strategy at this point is to divide the literature on death and dying into three broad approaches, each of which offer different insights into the meaning of death: scientific; spiritual and psycho-analytic. These groupings

merge almost as soon as they are studied, but they serve as a useful point of departure.

The scientific community is diverse, but at its core is an acceptance of empirical evidence and cause and effect. It is in clear opposition to Anam-Aire's certainty of a spiritual world in which events cannot be random, or meaningless: as she puts it: "all creation has been set in motion, and is orderly and clearly defined from a place of all-knowing and all-acceptance, therefore nothing is left to chance" (Anam-Aire 2005:32) Each paradigm has a clear sense of what is accepted as real and what is accepted as knowledge.

## **The Scientists**

In their most extreme manifestations, there is little overlap between belief systems. Richard Dawkins, biologist and advocate of natural selection, is a proponent of a clear scientific claim to truth. His aim is to show that the millions who believe they know what a soul, or spirit is, are misguided. He quotes an example to show how endemic this false thinking is:

On 21<sup>st</sup> February 2006 the United States Supreme Court ruled, in accordance with the Constitution, that a church in New Mexico should be exempt from the law, which everyone else has to obey, against the taking of hallucinogenic drugs. Faithful members of the Centro Espirita Beneficiente Uniao do Vegetal believe they can understand God only by drinking hoasco tea, which contains the illegal hallucinogenic dimethyltryptamine. Note that it is sufficient that they *believe* that the drug enhances their understanding. They do not have to produce evidence.(Dawkins 2007:44)

Belief rather than evidence as the basis for law infuriates Dawkins. He goes on to demonstrate, by logic, that it is extremely improbable that God exists. From this he infers that talking of soul or spirit is a meaningless activity: quoting Thomas Jefferson: "To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. (Dawkins 2007:67) He argues for a psychological evolutionary model, based on Darwinism, to explain the ubiquity of belief in spirit, soul, a consciousness that exists beyond death. He uses the concept of memetic natural selection to explain the hard wiring of our brains: "Natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them. Such trusting obedience is valuable for survival." (Dawkins 2007: 205) He introduces further models, including intentional stance and dualism, to build his position:

The general theory of religion as an accidental by-product – a misfiring of something useful, is the one I wish to advocate. The details are various, complicated and disputable...Part of what I want to say is that it doesn't matter what particular style of nonsense infects the child brain. Once infected, the child will grow up and infect the next generation with the same nonsense, whatever it happens to be. (Dawkins 2007: 219)

Peter Shaw, environmental biologist and former student of Dawkins develops Dawkins' position succinctly with the model, the 'null hypothesis' of the 'meme' complex. The null hypothesis is the same hypothesis as Occam's razor – a shorter, simpler proposition is inherently more likely to be true than a complex explanation of the same facts :

Organised religions are mind-infections (meme-complexes) selected through millennia to maximise their persistence, parasitic on the capability for

transcendence which is inherent in the human nervous system. The meme-complex functions as a PC virus, spreading itself from mind to mind, aided by armies (generals make good replicators) and religious leaders stressing the importance of faith (so that their assertions should not be questioned.) (Shaw 2007)

The other main element in Shaw's argument refers to Dimethyl trptamine (DMT). This is a chemical that can be synthetically made in the laboratory. Shaw points out that it produces "visions (often of non-earthly beings) when transfused into any normal healthy adult, along with a profound sense of having a transcendent experience" thus demonstrating the hard-wiring in our brain to have those experiences. DMT is particularly interesting, as it is naturally occurring in the body at birth and death. Rick Strassman is the scientist who investigated this drug in the 80s. His conclusions are diametrically opposed to Shaw's. Strassman argued this drug opened a hitherto closed sense perception to an objective reality. Shaw and most scientists argue that it is the drug itself (and the naturally occurring compound in the brain) that produces hallucinations.

## **The Shamans**

Shamans agree, with Strassman, that DMT, amongst other substances and non physical stimuli, can act as a catalyst to take us away from our 'ordinary' reality, and allow us to see into other worlds, like those defined by Anam-Aire, where time and space follow different rules. Shamanism is currently enjoying a revival of interest in the West, with a host of how-to weekends offered and an increase in both scholarly and self-help shamanic books. A key figure in this re-awakening is

Michael Harner, whose books built on the popularity of Carlos Castaneda (Harner 1990), and who describes the last twenty years as a shamanic renaissance.

For shamans, death is at the centre of their beliefs. Joan Halifax, a medical anthropologist made a useful survey of the literature on shamanism. She describes shamans as

emerging during the Upper Paleolithic period, and perhaps going back to Neanderthal times...Shamans are healers, seers and visionaries who have mastered death (Halifax 1979:3)

This mastery is in all cases achieved through a terrifying initiatory crisis, where the neophyte experiences themselves as being torn apart, and then reborn:

Among the Siberian Yakut, the shaman is an observer of his or her own dismemberment. In that state of awareness, he or she learns the territory of death.(Halifax 1979:13)

This experience of death, and usually, prolonged isolation, is reported from Alaska to Mexico to the Plains Indians of North America. The rewards for the suffering are knowledge: "This knowledge, attained through communication with the world of spirits, sets the shaman apart". (Halifax 1979:8)

What do these shamans, and Anam-Aire and Kübler-Ross mean by this 'knowledge'? Do they all mean the same thing? It provokes a vehement loyalty - as Kübler-Ross said, she could be hung by the fingernails and would still proclaim the certainty of what she saw. For rationalists, the lack of objective verifiable tests brings this into dangerous territory. If internal vehemence suffices to assert 'knowing', then how can superstitions, dogma

or prejudices ever be challenged? This is a justifiable fear, and can prevent any credence given to 'knowing' that cannot be empirically verified. I share this fear. On the other hand, the subject of my thesis demands further exploration. The pitfalls and dangers of such 'knowing' are clear. But is there anything to be gained from seeking, or acquiring, such knowledge? Only by experiencing this knowledge myself can I define what is lost by rejecting the sort of 'knowing' that seems to be integral to these thinkers on death. I will do this by becoming an epistemological 'participant observer', a sort of anthropologist of shamanic knowledge.

These writings on diverse shamanic cultures share one value: shamans serve community. Their purpose is, broadly, of balancing forces to allow healing and health. Their 'song' or story is meant to function as healing. The Shaman

singer brings into play his or her past experience of affliction and transcendent realization in relation to one who is now suffering. From the field of primary inspiration, he or she "sings into life" those who are plagued with disease and those who are facing death. (Halifax 1979:31)

The song is a performance to an audience, and composed of several elements. Knud Rasmussen (Rasmussen, 1908) was watching a very successful performance of a shaman being taken over by the walrus spirit when he noted that the shaman had two sticks which she surreptitiously hid in her sleeve, ready to place as 'tusks' when no-one was looking.

For a student of film, exploring the real and the imaginary, this is a fascinating observation of a shaman working before the growth of Western neo-shamanism, when shamanism still

functioned as a commonly accepted part of daily life. This shaman combined death and performance, function and art. Was she hoodwinking a naive audience? Was she making art? Does the fakery of this shaman mean she wasn't really experiencing the walrus spirit? Or was she trying to show the audience exactly what she has felt or seen? One way to ask these questions is to commit to a process similar to the Siberian shaman. My aim is to produce an experience for the audience where I ask them to journey with me, to experience my dreams and my shamanic journey, using the artifice of camera, animation, music and sound.

## **Shamanic Dreaming**

Dreams are important in all the shamanic cultures. Barbara Tedlock, anthropologist and scholar, gave the subject extended consideration, and brings it into the present. She argued that traditional coupling of prophetic dreams with tribal societies, and psycho-analytic dream analysis in 'literate' 'urban' 'modern' societies is inaccurate. She notes research that shows

middle class dreamers admit to having experienced dreams of the prophetic or precognitive sort in which they obtain information about future events. (in Harvey 2003:112)

She concludes that dreams should be understood in their specific field of transmission – i.e. who is being told, their relationship with the dreamer, and the wider social context including the language of the telling.

Tedlock relates her own experience as a 'participant observer' working with the Quiche-Mayans in 1976, when she and her

husband had both dreamt that the Hapiya, their Zuni Indian consultant, was dead. They told their dreams in detail to their Guatemalan colleague, who, as a trained dream interpreter immediately replied "Yesterday, or the day before, he died." They themselves felt their dreams "revealed our anxiety and guilt over leaving our previous fieldwork commitment to start up new fieldwork elsewhere." (Harvey 2003:119) In fact, Hapiya had died.

Tedlock does not enlarge on this fact, a reticence that is a little surprising in a western context, where such synchronicities usually merit investigation. It is the correlation with verifiable fact that makes prophetic dreams compelling. The web is studded with accounts of prophetic dreams about death. They appear particularly frequently in the *National Enquirer*. They clearly correspond with a public fascination with death, and a promise, however enigmatic, of some contact with, or control over, 'the other side'.

The correlation between dream and reality is not usually straight-forward. Metaphor seems as integral to dream interpretation in various shamanic cultures as it is to psychoanalysis. Tedlock warns against the simplification of a 'dream dictionary', where, for instance, bird = offspring. Although dream interpreters will often couch their response to a dream in terms of symbolic representation, the symbols are to be understood as 'complex psychodynamic events' (Harvey 2003:117) and must be interpreted through 'thick description', a term originated by Clifford Geertz to describe the cumulative effect of the hundreds of contextual details that create the context that provides the matrix for meaning (Geertz 1973).

## Jung on dreams

Carl Gustav Jung may have analyzed more dreams than anyone else, and can be credited as the crucible of much modern dream analysis. He reckoned he had heard over 40,000 dreams in the course of twenty years. **The Edge of Dreaming**, however, uses Jung's theory of archetypes to bring expanded possibilities to symbolic cinema, in contrast to Freud (and Lacan's) emphasis on interpreting unconscious motivation. Jung said that whereas Freud sought to bring the unconscious up to the surface of rational observation, Jung's approach was to go into the unconscious more on its own terms. The latter is the approach I followed by opting for the shamanic journey as a vehicle of research and discovery. Then I was forced to encounter a paradox that Jung highlights: 'I never look for archetypes and don't try to find them; enough when they come all by themselves.' (Jung 1976:160-1) Jung is interested in remaining longer in the realm of the mystery of dreams rather than pulling them into the conscious world.

In **The Symbolic Life** (Jung 1958) Jung distinguishes between different sorts of dreams, and is clear that dream analysis is relative to both the dreamer's personality type: (extravert, introvert), the mode:(thinking, feeling, sensation, intuition), and the associations the dreamer makes to the symbols of the dream. The individual dreamer has access also to archetypal images, which Jung defines as vestigial symbols from the inherited and innate collective instinct of the human species (Jung & von Franz 1964).

He quotes the example of a young girl who drew her dreams and gave them to her father. Her dreams were metaphysical, with images common to shamanic experiences:

A horde of small animals frightens the dreamer. The animals grow to enormous size, and one of them devours her....She is dangerously ill. Suddenly birds come out of her skin and cover her completely. (Jung, 1958: vol.18 p230).

For Jung, this was an example of a dream of death foretold. "Experience shows that the unknown approach of death casts an *adumbratio*, an anticipatory shadow; over the life and dreams of the victim." (Jung, 1958: 234). This young girl did, in fact, die shortly after these dreams. These dreams are not uncommon, and are chronicled in both ancient and recent history:

Our conscious thoughts often concern themselves with the future and its possibilities, and so does the unconscious and its dreams. There has long been a world-wide belief that the chief function of dreams is prognostication of the future. In antiquity, and still in the Middle Ages, dreams played their part in medical prognosis. I can confirm from a modern dream the prognosis, or rather precognition, in an old dream quoted by Artemidoros of Daldis in the second century A.D. (Jung, 1958: 237)

Jung goes on to offer various examples of dreams that foretold death, either of the dreamer or the doctor/analyst. He argues that these dreams are expressions of the unconscious, which is grappling with a problem, or situation, and intuitively and autonomously takes over the task of prognostication. It does this through a symbolic language, poetry rather than science, making use of archetypes which are universal:

Horse is an archetype that is widely current in mythology and folklore. As an animal it represents the non-human psyche, the subhuman, animal side, the unconscious. That is why horses in folklore sometimes see visions, hear voices and speak. ...The horse is dynamic and vehicular power: it carries one away like a surge of instinct...Also it has to do with sorcery and magical spells – especially the black night-horses which herald death . (Jung 1958: vol.16, p.210).

Dreams of ones own death, says Jung, (comfortingly, for me) do not usually mean death. Jung defines dreams as spontaneous self-portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious. (Jung, 1958: 263)

It is notorious that one often dreams of one's own death, but that is no serious matter. When it is really a question of death, the dream speaks another language. (Jung, 1958: 160)

That language is metaphorical, for instance a mountaineer dreamt he could go on climbing for ever: "And I discover that I can actually do so. I mount upwards on empty air, and awake in sheer ecstasy." (Jung, 1958: 151) On hearing this dream Jung begged the dreamer to mountaineer only with guides: he died shortly afterwards, on a mountain, alone. This raises an interesting point about the quality of the information available to the unconscious – is it more flexible than the prophetic knowledge we associate with Jung's precognitive dreams – otherwise why would Jung beg him to take more care? Is there a way to avoid the fate expressed in these premonitory dreams?

Mostly however, psychoanalysis believes that dreams are expressions of different parts of the dreamer's psyche. Psycho-analysis of a dream invites the client to inhabit the

different aspects of the dream, and build a dialogue between these parts. A sequence exploring this appears in the final documentary as the sequences in the film, where my husband, psychotherapist Peter Kravitz, suggests I can be more creative with my dream.

## **The Synthesisers**

Some of the most interesting thinkers in this field are those whose training and inclinations lead them to synthesise these polarised belief systems. Arnold Mindell, for instance, wrote a book **Coma, The Dream Body Near Death** describing his work as a hospital psycho-analyst. His background encourages him to build bridges between science, spirituality and psychotherapy. Originally a student of languages and science, he began a PhD in physics at M.I.T under Richard Feynman. He transferred to the University of Zurich, where his interest in dreams prompted a meeting and collaboration with Marie-Louise von Franz, the prominent contemporary of Jung. (Von Franz 1999) Mindell's PhD was finally taken in psychology, although his interest in physics, and scientist's curiosity and willingness to test theory with empirical evidence remain.

Editor Stephan Bodian, interviewed him:

"Just talking about the unconscious wasn't that interesting to me," he (Mindell) says, "I had to see how it operated in real, living people. That's how I eventually got into bodywork. I wanted to see how dreams lived in the body." In particular, his work with terminally ill patients "initiated me into modes of non-verbal communication whose significance I otherwise would have overlooked.(Bodian 1990)

Mindell states at the outset in one of his earliest works that “One of my goals is to familiarize the reader with the wide range of unusual events that most of us will encounter near death” (Mindell 1994:3) He refers to transcripts, dreams, metaphors and guided movements with dying patients within a framework he calls ‘process work’ (a particular psychotherapeutic model articulated by himself and his partner Amy Mindell).

He uses the Jungian notion that “dreams are processes trying to happen in consciousness” (Mindell 1994:23). His interpretation of dreams reflects the concepts of anima and animus, and projected split-off part of the personality as originally defined in Jung. Jung noted the good effects of attending to the insights of the symbolic life: “Why then, should we deprive ourselves of views that would prove helpful in crises and would give meaning to our existence?” (Jung & von Franz 1964:87) Later on, he becomes more vehement;

Modern man does not understand how much his ‘rationalism (which has destroyed his capacity to respond to numinous symbols and ideas) has put him at the mercy of the psychic underworld..he has lost his spiritual values to a positively dangerous degree. (Jung & von Franz 1964:94)

Jung described his response to religious symbols as being neither a believer of their divine origin, nor a skeptic. As already mentioned, Jung sees all symbols as “collective representations” that act on us, rather than signs we choose to construct. Dreams are seen as constructs of the unconscious, which can be brought to consciousness through working with the dream. Similarly, fantasies can reveal processes that can

be used to develop personal growth and free blocks or neurosis: "Dying in a fantasy is a way of regenerating" Mindell, 1994:27). Within his clearly defined framework of process work, Mindell has developed strategies for working with dying people that seem to result in their increased well-being and acceptance at the approach to death.

Mindell's reflections on his work with Peter, a man dying of leukemia, makes use of dream analysis, as well as physical mirroring and metaphor. After a dramatic emergence from a comatose state, Peter reported, smiling, that 'the bottle is just too small for the inner life! Mindell responded to this by noting that 'his actual body was intensely swollen. His kidneys had failed and the water had been collecting with no possible outlet. Mindell mirrored Peter's statements, and then made a suggestion "I know how to repair that. We can just open up the top of the bottle and let the spirit out a bit." Peter replied that the cork was in his throat, and began to cough and yell, mirrored enthusiastically by Mindell. He was then able to drink and urinate again.

Mindell describes these days:

Process theory tells us that the spirit in the bottle is the organizing story of his physical life...Amplification of somatic messages and comparison of these messages to dreams indicate that dreams and visions pattern proprioceptive experiences, organizing body behaviour. Peter had a lucid and loving last day, which he described to his partner as "the most wonderful day of his life." She said it was the closest they had ever been. (Mindell, 1994:42).

Quoting from another dying patient, Mindell believes "Everyone is pregnant with death. Everyone needs it. Near death, we all

have the same chance. We all have the chance to become our total selves.” (p.44, *ibid*). He concludes that “becoming our total selves must mean living out our personal myths....One conclusion to be made is that what we call ‘terminal diseases’ and death are personal myths trying to realize themselves” (Mindell, 1994:45). He emphasizes death as a metaphor:

Our identities want and need to die periodically. If your identity becomes too rigid, if you have stopped growing, or if something new wants to happen, then your old self dies. At any stage of life, therefore, death is rapid change, growth, and transformation of identity (Mindell, 1994:45).

The breadth and playfulness of Mindell’s interpretation of death struck me as a potentially useful model for my own research. I hoped it would inspire a structural freedom in my portrayal of death.

## **The storytellers**

The story **La Loba** is a myth, appearing as a short paragraph in Clarissa Pinkola Estes: **Women who run with the wolves** (Estes 1992). This story could be described as a meme by Dawkins and Shaw, since, certainly in my head, it made a claim for some sort of truth. If it did not, and could be categorised as art, Dawkins would see it an acceptable fruit of human emotions and skill, giving pleasure, but crucially, not containing any claim to truth. Pinkola Estes describes it:

I come from the Curanderisma healing tradition from Mexico and Central America. In this tradition a story is ‘holy,’ and it is used as medicine. The story is not told to lift you up, to make you feel better, or to entertain you, although all those things, of course, can be true. The story is meant to take the spirit into a descent to find

something that is lost or missing and to bring it back to consciousness again. (Wylde 1994)

The mysticism that Pinkola Estes describes, a story that takes the spirit into a descent to find something lost and to bring it back to consciousness seems to refer to concepts familiar from shamanism. As Joan Halifax the anthropologist wrote:

There is a doorway within our minds that usually remains hidden and secret until the time of death. The Huichol word for it is nierika. Nierika is a cosmic portway or interface between so-called ordinary and non-ordinary realities. It is the threshold through which one passes on the voyage to the world of death and visions. (Halifax 1979)

Arnold Mindell accepts a similar analogy: "As an Australian healer told me, we dream as individuals only because we are all dreaming together" (Mindell, 1993:7) "From the aboriginal viewpoint, modern psychotherapeutic techniques themselves are created or dreamed up by the earth spirit." (Mindell, 1993:11) He refers to the dreamingbody as our access to the stream of experience that connect us most profoundly with well-being, with what has been described in various cultures as tao, God, fate, or the unconscious. He argues that

Modern ideas about dreams and dreaming go back to ancient mythology. Celestial ascents and descents to the underworld involving the dreamingbody are basic to shamanism and may be our oldest and most widespread human spiritual experience. (Mindell, 1993:20) .

He notes that his experience with dying patients showed him that the approach to death gives close access to this dreamingbody.

Near death, we all experience our dreams as body experiences and seem to move with subtle, unpredictable inner and outer events. Death, the inevitable outcome for each individual, gives us perspective on our everyday lives. (Mindell, 1993:24)

Individual dreams should be understood in this context. I shall quote a passage in full, to clarify Mindell's approach to dream interpretation:

One of my clients dreamed that he had died. In this dream, he came out of his body but was amazed to still be awake. Instead of working on this dream, we followed his momentary body experience, which he described as a sense of being tired. When he focused on this experience, the fatigue transformed into relaxation and a sense of letting go.

He then felt and followed spontaneous shaking movements, which began in his knees, and suddenly we were in the midst of something he could no longer explain. He felt that these spontaneous movements were propelling him to walk about in a strange, jittery, gawky manner. Suddenly he stopped and said with surprise that he felt that dead spirits were moving him.

Now he was living his dreaming body. His body was moving as if he were being dreamed. His death or spirit had freed itself from his old body and his persona identity. He was moving as if he were dead. But something new was animating him, entering his body in order to direct it the way it wanted to go. He was not dead at all, but more fully alive than ever before.

Though this dream and body experience belongs to a particular individual, it shows an important connection. If you take body snapshots, momentary body experiences or signals, and use them as invitations to the unknown – if you let them evolve and unfold – they mirror recent dreams and become the dreamingbody (Mindell, 1993:22)

## Death and the Real

What is the link with reality here, or knowing, or truth? Tedlock's dream was verifiable: the death she dreamt did occur. The death Mindell refers to turns out to be a metaphor, an invitation, from Mindell's frame of reference, to his client to include 'dead spirits' in his waking life, so that he could be more "fully alive than ever before". If we refer back, for a moment, to Dawkins frame of scientific reference, this discussion would be literally impossible to have. Dawkins does not enlarge on the qualities of language that allow us to have these discussions, beyond an irritated reference to what he calls improperly constituted questions: why-questions with no empirical answer. And yet we can communicate with others, develop these concepts, investigate them, and even feel emotions as we use these concepts to reflect on our lives.

The most convincing of the arguments Dawkins puts forward in support of his resolute belief in the ridiculousness of any belief in soul, spirit or even the unconscious, is his argument from the human brain:

Constructing models is something the human brain is very good at. When we are asleep it is called dreaming; when we are awake we call it imagination or, when it is exceptionally vivid, hallucination...If we are gullible, we don't recognize hallucination or lucid dreaming for what it is and we claim to have seen or heard a ghost; or an angels; or God....such visions and manifestations are certainly not good grounds for believing that ghosts or angels, god or virgins, are actually there. (Dawkins, 2007:116)

For Dawkins, science is essential for human progress and well-being, and science recognises lucid dreaming for what it

is: a biologically induced series of model-making in the brain, a mix of random images from the recent days coloured perhaps by emotions such as anxiety or drives such as sexual frustration. Shamanism could, in particular contexts, define the dream as prophetic, and interpret it as forewarning of an imminent verifiable occurrence in the world. For Jung and Mindell, community and individual well-being are best served by paying attention to dreaming as an invitation to connect, or integrate, from a pre-existing spirit world called the dreamingbody, or for Jung the collective unconscious.

This brings me back to the question of how to define what is real, or true, here. Given that logic is itself questioned by one or possibly two of the paradigms above, my own experience at least allows one constant through which to appraise these different cosmologies. I continue my research by becoming both explorer and arbiter – I get to choose between the paradigms as I explore them through the process of filming. In this way, the dream functions as a litmus, the constant offering that unlocks the difference between these different world views, and allows me to explore the richness of their response: what does the dream of a death prophesy mean in these different paradigms: what does 'knowing' amount to in each matrix of belief?

## CHAPTER FOUR

# REFLECTIONS ON PROCESS

### Starting Point

This chapter chronicles my experiences and reflexive scrutiny of them as I explored death through the creation of a documentary film for the PhD by practice. I began making work before I had my dreams that I would die myself. There is a radical shift in practice after those dreams.

At the outset, my documentary activities took two forms. Firstly, I immersed myself in finding out as much as I could about death and dying, and filmed workshops, interviews, and talks by people who had made death in some way their profession. As already detailed, this produced sequences that raised audience expectations of information delivery that took the audience away from where I wanted them to be. Secondly, I experimented with creating a metaphorical visual language to express the 'feelingtone' (as Don Frederikson describes it) of some of my experiences with death. One such short piece was based on Pinkola Estes' **La Loba** story. I wanted to pick up on a way of accessing archetypal meaning as discussed in the literature review around Don Frederickson's work. I hoped that the story and the objects could supply a visual, playful possibility that might engage an audience differently.

**La Loba** is a folk-tale. This is how I wrote it into my first treatment:

*La Huesera* - Bone Woman; *La Trapera* - the Gatherer; *La Loba* - Wolf Woman. She is known in South America, in Mexico, by these names. The sole work of is the collecting of bones. Her cave is filled with *La Loba* the bones of all manner of desert creatures: the deer, the rattlesnake, and the crow. But her specialty is said to be wolves. She sifts through the montanas, and arroyos, dry riverbeds, looking for wolf bones and when the white sculpture of the creature is laid on the ground in front of her; she sits and thinks of a song. When at last she sings out, the rib bones and leg bones of the wolf begin to flesh out, and the creature becomes furred. *La Loba* sings breath into its chest, and the wolf starts running. Some say the woman runs with the wolf, some say the wolf turns into a person when it reaches the horizon, some say the wolf runs by itself, and is running now.

On a first reading it is a story about reanimation, or resurrection, from the long dead to life. As such it is a miracle story and this could be seen as the obvious source of my comfort. But it was not at this level that the story held power for me. Instead, focussing on the objects, the wolf bones themselves, seemed the key to my pleasure in the story, and my sense of its transformative potential.

I held the images of these dry bones in my mind. I remembered being at my mother's bedside, and overlaid the images produced by the story onto the image of my mother in the hospital bed. Somehow they *fitted*. The story freed up my mother's image for me. I could feel close to her. I started to see that this story held a key to a way of thinking about death that could result in a new filmic form. Specifically, it demanded that I pay attention to a different category of knowledge-gathering: not facts, not evidence based, but something less scientific, less clearly definable.

I was not sure at all why this was working, or even what 'working' or *fit* meant. I decided to take the story and create it in film. Could I produce the same response in an audience with this story, as the story had produced in me? Could it be liberating for the audience, and an agent of transformation of the images in the documentary? Because I was very unsure why or how this was working for me, I began by simply experimenting. My first attempt was a literal illustration of the story. Perhaps I could show the bones, and then animate them, and make a visual transition (as basic as a cross-dissolve?) to a live, running wolf.

I went to some lengths to find real wolf bones, and to construct a loose narrative that would allow me to look at bones. I also sourced bones from a butcher, boiling off the fat and flesh, so that I could film them being picked up from a rocky landscape. Bones on the sand, the elements of wind, rucksack, stone, rock formations, seemed already as many ingredients as I could control. As I began to create real images in the sand, my initial idea of turning these bones into a real wolf seemed forced, and also unnecessary. Perhaps the transformation of the bones to life should happen in the viewer's mind. I turned my attention back to the possibilities in front of me, moving bones around, looking at the connections between the bones and the rocks, between the bones and the live skin of the arm.

I found the filmed sequence beautiful. I found it an exact correlation to the mood of being in the hospital, those long silences, waves of emotions that broke, sometimes, into tears or foot massages or furious internal monologues, and at other times subsided into further waiting, turning back to the novel, or the waiting room magazine.

Creating the skeleton of the wolf on the sand allowed me to be playful, to set up expectations – of a skull joined to a vertebrae joined to shoulder bones joined to leg bones – the recognisable skeleton of the animal that allows it to run – and then to subvert them: replacing the tailbone with another head, this time of a bird, so that the mammal backbone becomes the sinuous weave of a two headed snake.

It reminded me of the way everything seems to get mixed up in death. My mother had shocked us all by calling her devoted partner by the name of a former lover as her current partner was stroking her. Using the bones offered a visual, playful, correlation to this: after setting up a convention of placing the bones on the sand to create the shapes of the animals, I subverted it by making marks directly onto the ground of the image, drawing spikes along the vertebrae on the sand, creating a dragon, a mythic figure, from the literal bones of the wolf. Then I let my hands enter the frame, rubbing the shapes from the sand, breaking the three dimensional frame further, revealing it as a two dimensional image, and then almost literally whipping the rug from the image itself. I found this deeply satisfying. The sequence is visible in the DVD appendix: **First Cut**.

## **Audience Feedback**

Did my playful, aesthetic exploration and illustration of the story have the same effect on audiences that the story had had on me? It did not seem to. People admired its beauty. But it

did not move them. It was a private pleasure, meaning much more to me than to anyone else. When I asked people which images they remembered, or which they cared about, they told me it was the image of me alone in the hospital, waiting. So my sequence was not working as I had wanted it to. It didn't produce the liberating, playful quality for the audience that I had experienced. I decided to keep those images as my private support. They had been my first successful step to creating a language that I was learning, word by word. Even if no-one else spoke it, to make a sentence in my own words felt like an achievement. I was, at last, in dialogue with myself, even if not with anyone else. I decided I would be open to new structures, or ways of using either the story or the images, and focussed on learning about death.

Looking back, it's clear that this was the first of a series of decisions to give more weight to audience response. This would have an important effect on the final choice of film structure. Although I had created images that satisfied me personally, I was willing to shelve them in my need to communicate to as wide an audience as possible. I prioritised audience take-up over my private contentment. This choice would be repeated at different junctures and can be understood as an underlying principle guiding the structure of the film that was eventually produced. I felt the work was complete only if I saw it accepted by an audience, and actually incorporated into their thinking and their experience.

Two of the people I had interviewed during the initial research seemed to offer the potential to become the centre of a film exploring death: Arnold Mindell and Phyllida Anam-Aire. Mindell had written several books on process work

psychotherapy dealing with death, some of which are referenced in the literature review (Mindell 1995). One contained transcripts of his hospital work with dying patients. I contacted him and his partner, who focused on body work, and emailed them questions which they responded to by recording audio answers. One response seemed to unlock a way forward in the film. He said:

Death, well it is the end of everything we know. It is the end of the personality. But in another way we say oh oh something new is happening here. Let's go with it. (Mindell, 2004)

As already mentioned, I started filming the Mindells (and his partner Amy), attending their four week long course in death and dying in Portland, Oregon, U.S. I found the content of their lectures fascinating, and their demonstrations in large groups riveting. The Mindells brought a discursive breadth to their lectures, with references from quantum physics to biology to health to dance that were exceptionally stimulating. They were the founders of a type of psychotherapy called process work, with its own vocabulary and conceptual framework for making sense of the world.

We had to learn what was meant by their terms 'edges', and 'primary and secondary processes' and recognise objects that 'flirted' with us. This language succeeded in putting brackets around 'consensus reality' and created a coherent matrix that allowed us to switch nimbly between perspectives. It offered a certain precision to descriptive accounts, and had allowed the Mindells to do powerful work with the dying. I filmed all the classes, and some individual process work client sessions.

However, once the footage was in the cutting room, it was

clear that it was hard to get the content to communicate. The specialist vocabulary was a stumbling block. The classes were made up mainly of process work students, and their admiration of their gifted teacher detracted from the power of his analysis, and his compelling anecdotes. Talking on camera, however riveting the content, would not make the film audience experience what he was talking about. I realised I needed to get much closer to the Mindells, and to do private interviews with each of them, and to observe them in their home lives. This proved difficult to organise, as they were very busy and highly celebrated in the process work world, as well as based in the west coast of America.

Another powerful figure working with death and dying was Phyllida Anam-Aire, working in the North of Scotland, Ireland and Germany. As a participant observer, I filmed several of her workshops. Again, one thing she said was particularly powerful:

At the moment of death, everything you have not done in life comes up for recognition. (Anam-Aire 2004)

I was able to get closer to Phyllida, and filmed her at her home and with friends and with her partner.

Phyllida described death within a Celtic perspective that she was at pains to clearly define. It was harder to ascertain whether this was a widely accepted, or historically accurate, or personal and poetic Celtic world-view. Her descriptions, however, were detailed and precise. Death happened, she said, in stages and she outlined the Celtic *bardos* that described the process.

However, when I reviewed the filmed talks, away from the circle of emotionally involved students, they seemed information heavy and hard to take in. These factual statements could be seen only as my background research. Similarly, I would have to accept that the emotionally and physically taxing process of getting the footage, of experiencing the workshops and being myself challenged on many levels, was simply the accumulation of background knowledge, serving to broaden my perspective. The footage, itself, however, was unappealing, and could not be part of a film. How could I translate these pedestrian images into something that could communicate what I was learning?

## **Search for Form**

I decided to try a simply observational approach. It is what I had been trained to do at the National Film and Television School, where I had not only graduated with an ethnographic film but had also directed films with two visiting anthropologists in Indonesia and Mali.

In the two years of working on the PhD before I had my three dreams, I looked for an ethnographic structure. I had identified people who could enlighten me on the meaning, and act as a bridge between the new culture of the spirit and my atheist, sceptic self. The field of ethnography has gone through several shifts during the last thirty years, and auto-ethnography in particular, has been the focus of attention from both literary

and social science perspectives.<sup>2</sup> However, at this stage I was set on a tradition ethnographic qualitative research method using participant observation and interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of a group's culture. I had become a participant observer, and was accepted by the group whose customs and worldview I wanted to understand.

In order to make a film from this situation, I felt I needed a main character, preferably one who was going through a rite of transformation that would allow me to film many stages of this Celtic perspective on death.

Phyllida had agreed to 'look after' a woman called Eve who was sure she would die in the next two years. Eve asked me to film her dying process, which she had planned with Phyllida to incorporate Celtic rituals. I began to map out a possible observationally based structure of the film with Eve and Phyllida as central characters. Eve was a strong character in her seventies, frail, beautiful, with a perfect speaking voice. It turned out she had been a radio actress in the 1940s. She had a wonderful archive of photographs showing her raising her children in Africa, with big cats, horses, and a retinue of servants.

I filmed her packing up her house and sending herself into sheltered accommodation. As we drove there, she said:

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<sup>2</sup> A useful discussion of the various positions taken here appears in Renov's book *The Subject of Documentary*, where he skilfully charts self inscription as a relatively nascent cultural form, examining a diversity of autobiographical practices. He grounds his book in both historical and political descriptions, analysing structural discourses that link auto-ethnography with post-structuralism, with its performative aspects, and with its problematisation of the self.

Now I can forget my body, because they will look after it for me in the home. And I can think only about the spirit. (Cromie 2004)

I decided on a structure where I would follow Eve through her dying process, assisted by Phyllida. I filmed Eve for two years. She talked about dying, and about her weakening body (she had post polio syndrome, and found it hard to walk). I filmed as she was settling into a small room in a residential block, where the television was always on, and residents were propped up in wheel-chairs in front of it. I filmed as she remembered her friends, her children, her marriage and her lovers. I filmed as she practiced her dying with Phyllida, and as she phoned Phyllida when her death did not arrive, and she could hardly bear to go on living.

As she became more ill, I made tapes of Hannah Cunningham, a work colleague of Anam-Aire's that I thought would interest her. She was very anxious to slip away into death. In her own words, she wondered "why am I hanging on and on and on? I want to be away. I have no use for this body now." Friends came to celebrate her birthdays. She switched to a different residential home.

## **Death**

In the meantime, death entered my own circle of friends. A good friend, Em, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, in her early forties. After a traumatic and unsuccessful operation, she came off all medical intervention and treated her illness holistically. She wrote to me, enclosing a card with a photo on the front, in which she asked all her friends to pray or think or

meditate on her at 9.00 p.m. every Tuesday. We were a dispersed and diverse group, incorporating nuns, film-makers, writers, artists, socialites. Em was Irish, and I wanted to give her some sense of how death could be seen in these Celtic workshops. I asked Phyllida if we could incorporate a filmed ritual, held on Tuesday at 9.00, into one of the workshops. She agreed, and we created a short film for Em.

Em loved this film. As her health went downhill, she played the tape on a loop by her bedside and told me it reduced her need for morphine. This seemed extraordinary. The film was meant to intrigue her, and be evidence that people were thinking about her. I had made images that I thought would speak to her – and to my sense of who she was – a vivid red flower, for instance, which I submerged in the sea. It seemed very surprising that watching a short film could reduce anyone's need for pain-relieving drugs. Could film relieve pain? Could film be used, or seen, as medicine?

I spoke to Em after she received the film. She could not explain why it worked for her. She said it moved her to tears every time she watched it. I think, now, it was because it spoke exactly to her predicament, from a few different perspectives. It is a short film. It begins with a woman sitting on a beach who says: "I don't know much, Em, but I do know this: tell your troubles to a stone. And the stone in turn will tell it to the earth..." I made beautiful images of each of the elements, which I edited to her words. I then split the film into sections, corresponding to what I had learnt was the build up to a Celtic ritual. The film followed the structure of charms and spells and incantations that was familiar to me from the **Carmina Gaedelica**, Alasdair Carmichael's collection of the Gaelic

words used in the Highlands of Scotland to accompany most daily activities, to pray, to give thanks, and to cope with difficulties (Carmichael 1992).

I made other short films for Em, which were more informative, making more manifest the Celtic traditions of anam-cara, the 'soul friend' whose job it was to accompany the dying across the threshold between life and death. (O' Donohue 1997). I showed her bits of film from the workshops I was attending. Em enjoyed the short films, but followed by by asking for further explanations. The films connected with her intellect, and she responded with a desire to elucidate, clarify, expound. They were good as a diversion from her illness, but not as successful as the first film in terms of something Em wanted to stay with. She continued to use the first film as pain relief.

Em died in a hospice, after a protracted diminution of her abilities and her energy. The last time I saw her she held my gaze for a long time, very intensely alive, angry at her body's collapse. Em told me how she slashed as many trees as she could find. She was like a flame, destructive, vivid, beautiful. I knew, without asking, that she didn't want to be filmed. She was especially angry that she was dying before she had had the chance to carry out her dreams and plans – she had not found her life partner, had not had children, had not spent the year in Ireland writing that she had promised herself. It seemed unbearable.

## **Healing Films**

The tradition of healing stories described by Dr. Estes (Wylde, 1994) during the literature review seemed to offer a sort of development of what I produced for Em. Perhaps it was also the case that the story of **La Loba** itself had functioned in some way for me as a healing story.

The story is meant to take the spirit into a descent to find something that is lost or missing and to bring it back to consciousness again. (Wylde, 1994)

Was this what was happening for Em? Had I, unexpectedly, produced a 'healing story?' Em is dead, and I cannot ask her if she feels that is what happened. What could have been lost, and recovered? These are esoteric questions that I did not think to ask then. They are impossible to answer on behalf of another person.

I went on to make a further film for Eve, that she also found of comfort. I used the sound of a cat purring, as I knew she was missing her cat in the residential home, and cut together footage of Celtic shape-shifting, as described by a down-to-earth Aberdonian farmer - Hannah Cunningham - who used shape-shifting as a way to control the pain from her cancer. Eve knew of Hannah, and seeing Hannah and her mentor Phyllida brought to her bed via a laptop, was itself a tonic for her.

It didn't seem as though these films could be incorporated into my PhD. But perhaps it could be part of my contextual research? I found an organization, a charity called Rosetta Life that arose from Lucinda Jarrett's time as a hospice volunteer. She set up 'Life Stories', a project to help people tell their own stories, facilitated by artists' residencies. It produced films and

songs, with the dying person often as a character in the film.  
As they put it, they are

An artist-led organisation set up to run artist-led residencies in hospices, help families facing death tell the stories that matter to them and share them with an audience of their choice. Multi-media arts centres have been set up in the hospices which allow participation in learning activities and contribute to the quality of life at the end of life. (Rosetta Life 2010)

They initiated an innovative technological closed distribution system, so that users of the project could share their works with each other:

Wireless outreach networks in hospices make digital arts available at a patient's website. The shared website helps create a collective voice for palliative care users and currently links 15 specialist palliative care centres in England. (Rosetta Life 2010)

It is an inspiring project, and a real attempt is made to make sure that the filmmakers are not simply using the suffering they encounter as a 'feed' with a strong emotional push to help them make films. Their work ranges across song, film, and many live events, such as concerts. They explore the use of audio-visual media to create dialogue, and focus on personal relationships between the artists-in-residence and the hospice users. This focus takes precedence over the films themselves.

The film language is conventional, often a simple recording of a poem spoken aloud, or a song sung. **Hunstanton Beach** by Asif Kapadia has more texture as a film, and maintains an elegiac tone throughout. It is composed of interviews and leafing through old photographs. Most of the films were aimed at an audience of the relatives. I met one of the co-founders,

Chris Rawlence, who showed me what he described as one of the most successful films for a public audience. It was a well shot story of a man's relative, and his part in the 1916 Easter Rising at the GPO in Dublin, with music by Michael Nyman. It was hard to see the difference between this and a television documentary film.

I knew I needed to make the material I was working with – digital film – somehow work harder than this. What I meant by that, was a need for the work to access several levels of communication. I wanted to embed my exploration of death in an emotional and intellectual journey for the audience that went beyond simple information exchange. I was still filming *Eve*. However, I wanted to produce something that made death, so central to centuries of storytelling, and dealt with so casually in mainstream fiction films, as vivid and as powerful as my experience of it.

### **Personal Story: First Dream**

I was concerned that my horse George, was aging. He was enormous, over 17 hands high, a chestnut thoroughbred we had bought cheap after he had dumped a well known Scots rugby player in the mud on his first outing. George loved to buck. He could not help himself. His back would arch, he would compress his hindquarters, and with a squeal of pleasure would unleash a volley of kicks around nine feet above ground level. We all fell off him. He always looked astonished, almost audibly urging you to hurry back on.

He was now over 20, arthritic, but still loved to hit the road trotting. One August night I had gone to bed early and woke at 4 a.m. I had a dream that George stood opposite me with a long wavy red coat like a red setter's, and asked if I was ready to film, because he was going to fall to the left. I checked focus and frame. Then he did fall, onto the ground and into my camera frame, just as he had said. I woke up, heart hammering in my chest, sweating, sure he was dead.

It was dark, and silent. I got out of bed, feeling scared and irritated about my compulsion to go and check in the middle of the night. I went outside. Owls hooted. The air was cool, and the trees a deeper dark than the sky. George wasn't in his field. I walked out of the field gate and turned sharp right into the forest. It was hard to see, but George was lying on his side, legs outstretched, hooves pointing in the long grass. He was still slightly warm to the touch, but there was no heartbeat. He really was dead. I ran back to the house.

I picked up a friend's Super 8 camera to film him. My hands were shaking and the camera dropped and broke in two pieces. (Later I developed the film, and found only one image – of a toy horse lying on the kitchen floor, legs sticking up. I didn't include it in the film. It would have looked as though I had constructed a clumsy synchronicity, attempting to make a supernatural point).

I took the breaking of the camera as a sign that I could not do this alone, and went upstairs at five in the morning and asked my husband if he would come with me. He did, and I found an old video camera, and I filmed George lying there, as the sun came up. I told Pete about the dream. He had to go to work,

but I cancelled my days' film teaching, and phoned a vet, and a digger to come and bury the horse.

I was not sure how I would use this footage. I had thought I would film George's death as part of an exploration on choice. Watching Eve get more infirm, and watching Em die, so slowly and in such pain, had been very depressing. I had thought I could perhaps contrast their suffering with my ability to give the horse George a painless death at a time that suited us both. But death wrecks plans.

My ten-year-old daughter responded to the horse's death by training our dog to do a new trick. She persuaded him to lie still, growling 'Dead Dog, Dead Dog' in a low voice, then made him leap up by shouting 'Alive Alive.' As an ethnographer, I felt I was filming a key demonstration of a child's belief in a magical reality. It also inspired me to make my own comforting ritual: I drew an outline of George galloping where we had buried him, and planted it with thousands of poppies. I imagined a shimmering scarlet horse shape. But only two of the seeds came up.

Meanwhile, my previous partner from film school, and the father of my eldest child, Arthur Howes, had been told he had lung cancer. He was being cared for by a 24 hour rota of friends. As the cancer spread, he had longer hospital stays. Friends and students brought him films. Arthur did not want to talk about dying, and did not want to move to a hospice. Eli, my son, and I had a last visit with him at the house where Eli was born. After our return to Scotland Arthur phoned. He had gone into a hospice he said. 'Where are you', I asked. 'Leicester Square' he replied. I repeated it, incredulous. He

was laughing, and told me of the views across Soho. I was pleased. Only Arthur could find a hospice in London's pleasure centre, and the location of our early films together. I passed the phone to Eli.

An hour later Arthur was dead. He died in the arms of an old friend from Ghana, Baba. When Eli and I got the phone call, Eli collapsed. He went to bed, closed the shutters, and lay there day after day, with photos of Arthur next to him. There was a funeral in Gibraltar, and we organised a mass at Brompton Oratory. Death seemed to have become a constant in my life. I was facing it in so many ways. I felt overloaded. I clung to my simple film structure, that I would tell the story of Eve, of her dying process, and how Phyllida was bringing back an old Celtic tradition – the *anam cara* – to modern life.

## **Obstacles to Filming**

I filmed every major transition with Eve, following her from nursing home to nursing home, creating montages of her history in the form of a letter to her best friend.

The filming became increasingly sad. Filming that had started as an energetic and playful response to Phyllida's provocative challenges to Eve, meant to encourage her to assess her life and make it in some way visible to her, became the chronicling of an increasingly infirm and depressed woman who felt she had lost control of her life. Was this what death was: a gradual diminution of energy? Although I found it difficult, I carried on filming. These rushes, however sad, seemed something I

could work with in the editing room in a way that I could not begin to do with the earlier interview footage.

Eve then died, as she would have wished, with Phyllida next to her, telling her the Celtic aite, or bardos, and reflecting back to her life as she had lived it, and the loves and family she had created. I was in Morocco, out of email and mobile phone contact for the first time in three years. I got home just after her funeral.

I no longer had a film structure. Death seemed all around me, and I could not see a way to reflect my experience or indeed turn my research into a film. I was in a quandary. I had missed the key event, Eve's death, which would make sense of all the other footage that I had of Eve, of Phyllida's Celtic bardos. Was there another structure? I offered Eve's daughter the tapes I had filmed, but she refused them. She was embarrassed by her mother's (as she saw it) obsession with death, and wanted to retain her own memories. I re-examined the rest of my filming and research about death over the preceding three years.

## **Second Dream**

I had had a very frightening dream, a few months after Arthur had died. It had been so frightening I had refused to think about it. I had dismissed it from my mind in every way I could. It now seemed not only as a possible structure for the film, but increasingly, the *only* possible structure for the film.

The dream had shocked and frightened me. It had the quality of the dream of George, in that it woke me up, terrified. Two years after he died, Arthur came to me in the dream. I was pleased to see him. He looked exactly as he always did, warm, dark curly hair, slightly damp skin and smiling eyes. He said he had something to tell me. I was going to die in my 48<sup>th</sup> year. He didn't want to tell me but he thought I would want to know. He was sorry. I told him not to play jokes on me. He said it wasn't a joke, and he had made an effort to come and to warn me. I argued with him vehemently, pointing out that Eli was still recovering from his loss, and could not also lose me. I was still raising three children I said. Arthur nodded. "I know, I know. It's not up to me. I'm sorry. I heard and thought you would want to know. You will die when you are 48." I woke up, shocked out of sleep, just as I had been when I had dreamt of George, the horse. This dream carried a death sentence.

## **New Structure**

I fought against the idea of using this dream as a structure for a film for months. However, when I had not been with Eve when she died, I was thrown back to this dream. It offered a simple story – show myself at home, as an atheist, a busy mother, who is shocked by the first dream coming true, and then cannot rid herself of the fear that the second dream may come true. It would also be a way of testing the different epistemologies I had been exploring in the literature review: if the dream did not materialise, this would prove that spirits did not exist: and if I did die then I would know that spirits were real.

However, the idea of making a personal film was anathema to me. I did not want to expose myself or my family in this way. I also assessed myself as weak main character material: too self-conscious, too introverted and reflective. There is also a simple structural impediment. Telling our own dream is invariably fascinating to ourselves, but almost always uninteresting for the recipient. So I was setting out on a possible structure which I would find absorbing, but would fail to communicate. I knew from my previous decision that this would not be acceptable to me. I decided to test it out. Spanish was Arthur's first language so I got a Spanish speaking friend to say the words Arthur had said to me in the dream, and filmed exteriors of our house in the landscape. I then cut a short sequence, putting both dreams together.

Looking at this four minute rough cut I found the energy I had been looking for. The images came alive. Death was something I felt. I checked with others. They were scared, fascinated. It seemed I had found - however reluctantly - my structure.

## **Challenges**

There were two main challenges, one filmic and one personal . Filmically, I was committed to finding a visual, innovative language to portray consciousness. This structure of my two dreams seemed to demand a strong conventional story structure, with narrative tension, audience identification and an integral desire for closure. I had already noted the intriguing but disappointing outcome when Jennifer Fox had used

conventional character depiction techniques to portray herself. This structure was much less exploratory than I had intended. It was also a form I was not confident in. It would be a steep learning curve for me.

The other challenge was more immediate. I was very scared by the dream. And further, I was embarrassed by it. I asked my supervisor Professor Noe Mendelle not to tell the staff at Edinburgh College of Art. I did not want people to think either that I was going to be dead within the year, or that I was so gullible I believed in my own scary dreams. An even bigger problem was that I had a genuine fear that this was my last year of life.

These problems were not resolved at once, and were worked through gradually, as I accepted the challenge of using these dreams as the structure for my PhD by practice. At times the research questions at the outset were overtaken with a new order of sub-questions: my personal fear that this dream might come true and this was the last year of my life? Thinking back to the suddenness of my own mother's death, I was aware of the hole that was left. We had little record of my mother's life: some photos, a few seconds of film. The sound recordings of her voice were precious to me. I loved showing them to answer my children's questions about their grandmother who they were descended from. If this dream did come true, and I did have only twelve months to live, I knew I wanted to ensure my children would not be left with such a gap.

I decided to film everyday moments of my life with the children – putting them to bed, taking them to school, conversations on the sofa, etc. I wanted the texture, the feel of everyday life. I

started to document the sort of sequences I wished I could remember of my mum: what sort of tea she used to cook me, and what sort of stories she told to help me sleep.

I told my eldest child, Arthur's son, about the dream of Arthur on the morning I woke up with it. I had a sense that to keep this dream a secret could allow it to fester, and grow in strength. But he was shocked, and turned to me white faced, saying 'Don't die mum. I've already lost Arthur. I can't afford to lose you too.' I immediately decided not to tell his two younger siblings, my daughters. It could scare them. It would also create a tension about the filming that would overload our natural interactions, and I thought it might make them overwhelmingly solicitous of me.

I did tell my husband Peter, and filmed his response. I put the camera on a tripod by the bed, behind me, so that only he was visible in a close-up, and he could focus on me, not the camera. I did not touch it once we started talking. We talked for around 40 minutes, and he responded to me and the dream partly as a professional psychotherapist, and partly as a protective husband. His answers were thought provoking, encouraging me to look at the dream as a creative (storytelling) response from my subconscious to various stresses in my life. I used part of this in the film.

I began filming most days, keeping a diary, and looking. I spent that year really looking. Particularly at the landscape immediately around me, at my family, my husband, my children, our animals. I also read. What did I know of death already? What more did I have to research? Having a death

sentence, even if it was a dreamt one, and therefore of uncertain outcome, gave these questions a new intensity.

I re-read Jung and Freud, and accounts of palliative care nurses and doctors. I noted that I was capable of holding two possibilities through my day-to-day life: one that I would live, and another that I would die. Two different areas of investigation flowed from these binary beliefs. Within the first, the status of knowledge became an increasingly important subject of further investigation. What is the knowing that comes from a dream? What is its link with what we commonly see as reality? I read up on neuroscience and dreams, focussing on Adam Zeman and Mark Solms, two distinguished neuroscientists, both of whom had done original work on the dreaming brain (Zeman 2003), (Zeman 2008), Solms, 2002).

For the second area of investigation, I read about people facing death. One account, in particular, spoke to me. It would end up as the last 'thought' expressed in the film. I found a blog on the internet by the mother of a terminally ill child. She said, simply, that she had tried living each day as though you might die tomorrow, and had found it a strain. Knowing her daughter was dying, she found it simpler and richer to live as though you were going to live forever.

These binary thought processes and explorations weave through my workbook entries for that year, when I was 48, and which I had been told would be my last year of life. This diary entry gives a good account of my mental state at the time, alternating between rationalism, terror, and a surprising pragmatism. I referred to these diaries frequently whilst filming,

and also during the editing. Their authenticity, their scope, their detail and their sensuality became a touchstone that I wanted to achieve in the final practice outcome.

DIARY March 2007

*I have had two dreams about death. I have also planted over a thousand trees, and planned to direct a scientific documentary feature on stem cell innovation. I have become used to the schizophrenia of planning for the future – a year ahead, five, ten, fifty. Investing my imagination in a future and investing my present moment in digging in seedlings, planning a studio, meeting with an architect, funders for films three years ahead. While simultaneously letting go of a future that would include me looking at these trees, directing this movie, raising my children.*

*Raising my children can hardly be slipped in as the third clause after a comma. It requires its own focus. I think about it 100 times a day. I accept the taste of the present moment as it fills my mouth, lungs, limbs, with pleasure, aware that it might be one of the last. So that when I hug my littlest daughter, and we film each other singing our daft song 'I love Nell because she is (Nell: 'the best!') a little yum, and a little miss, She's so scrum, I can't believe, she came out of my tum!' I am doing several things. I am looking at this moment from several points of view.*

*I am lazily loving my daughter, enjoying her light quick body and warm hands, soft hair and delicious sticking out ears, whilst waking up and having a cup of tea.*

*I am aware that she eats this love, and she is taking what she needs and wants to grow up into a loving playful confident woman.*

*I am conscious that if I do die, she has memories, and now that we try to film, a documentation, however clumsily captured, that will bring those habitual moments back into her life. Maybe they recall those*

*moments. Maybe they replace the memory of those moments.*

*I think both will happen, and it is a driver of my desire to find the exact, the precise language of cinema to document, to express, these moments as I feel they are: the richness, the playfulness, the laziness, the habitual, the sensual. (It is also a technical driver – I search for the camera, or sound recorder, that reflects the sound or image as I experience it).*

*I am also conscious that these images must replace me as a sort of mother role model, so that I live beyond my physical death, still functioning as a presence in the raising of a bright loving girl to womanhood.*

*I am also clear that I am making a film for a PhD, and that I may not die, and this might all be cut together, and perhaps with the outside perspective an editor brings, and it needs to constitute a film for an audience who is not a bereaved child, or a grieving family, but strangers, sitting in a cinema, or even PhD examiners, watching at home after a week marking. It is, however, a film for a PhD by practice, not for television, and so I give myself the liberty, and the responsibility, of creating a documentary language that will articulate these reflections and pre-occupations with some precision.*

Within a short time, I carried on to have three dreams in quick succession about how I would die. These dreams surprised me because they were not identical, although they had a similar process. The first took place in the Edinburgh College of Art, when I picked up a plastic bag and it exploded.

*... I was lifted up, and increased speed, as I was sent through the hall and windows. This is how it happens I thought. There is no pain. It's OK. A quick death.*

The second I had twice. I was on my horse and he tripped and I fell, banging my head.

*I'm riding Mungo, he's falling, head down. Little mewling noises coming from him. Me thinking this is it. There is no pain. It's OK. A quick death.*

I had that dream twice, two nights running. These dreams made me both more and less anxious. Less anxious in that death seemed OK, painless, and the repeated rehearsal stressed a fast movement outwards and away from earth, and no emotional heartbreak. They seemed a creative reworking of the same fear of death, since they were not describing exactly the same event. On the other hand, they made me more anxious, in that my dreams seemed to be following a coherent plan of preparing me for actual death.

DIARY March 2007

*It's odd – walking through the land with Peter yesterday in the last oblique yellow sun, glowing in the new stretches of grass. The trees peeping over their protector tubes, the 72 broom still to plant. Imagining, actively working on the landscape 5, 10, 20, 50 years from now. And then the dream of a violent death, a flying death, propelled out of life through a fast disintegrating window/wall.*

*Thin horizontal grey cloud licking and flowing over hills yesterday. Missed the clarity of it, but caught the tail end with camera. Used the manual settings for the first time. Planning the bathroom, the duckhouse, the trees on the track. Deeply satisfying. The track will become a visual part of our landscape, as the hills are. The trees become especially important.*

*Still looking for a pale yellowish tree. But maybe the jacquemonte birches would be most striking. (Or will they look skeletal, a track lined with white limbs, all winter) Deathsykehead.*

*In my dream I totally accepted the explosion, my sailing into death. But it woke me up, and my body was rigid and I was gasping. The struggle of the body. (I feel tearful as I write this. Why)*

*I got slightly more the movie look I like with a tiny moment filmed on the Canon G7 when Alice Annie Tim Eliza were leaving. Faces appear, disappear, in the dark.*

*I didn't tell Pete my dream. He set off to the Lake District with Lotte to be dropped at the Allan Ramsey for the Garvald bus.*

*Nell's ears like an elf. We filmed ourselves kissing and hugging with the G9 camera. It's the most fun. Nell filmed me.*

*Do I film a message to my family? In case these dreams are prophetic?*

*Does this focus create a self-fulfilling prophesy?*

*I hate these earnest private confessionals to camera shots.*

*I do it sound only. Outside.*

*I always film me travelling? In the first half of the film anyway.*

It is clear that I was very involved in my dreams and very afraid. Yet I was also committed to filming. Beyond the fact that I was registered to do a PhD by practice, I had two particularly potent motivations: as mentioned, to create an archive of raising the children in case I did die; and secondly, to do a documentary version of the strategy I had read about in *American Anthropologist* during the literature review (Wallace 1958). As Michael Harner, anthropologist and shaman, had written

Big dreams are to be taken as literal messages, not to be analysed for hidden symbolism. For example, if you have a big dream that you are injured in an automobile

accident, that is a warning for you from the guardian spirit that such an accident will occur.

You may not be able to prevent it, but you can enact it symbolically by yourself or with a friend in a very minor way and may thereby prevent its serious occurrence.... recreate the dream in a simple, harmless way, and get it over with. This is a technique once known to some tribes in north-eastern and western North America. (Harner 1990:100)

I think that perhaps my filming of this year is a form of enacting the dream. But I am not sure. In a contemporary documentary about land rights I see that such societies still exist. In both the historical accounts and the documentary, the indigenous villagers come together in the mornings to talk over their dreams over breakfast. The elders explain the meanings and what actions should be taken. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Iroquois went further than discussion: they seemed to have a way of acting out their dreams in the community. It has been described as the beginnings of gestalt therapy.

Am I doing something like this already by making this film? Should I go further and act out my own death, maybe by animating it? Which story should I choose? Mungo, or the college shop? I film them both. The Mungo dream seems more vivid, clearer. I include it in the film. With Cameron Duguid, the animator I have worked with on five science films now, we experiment to find a way to keep the authenticity of the home-movie, whilst creating the exact images from my dreams. Cameron treats my digital movie images by printing out each individual frame, and adds inks and water. I am happy with the result. It is short, vivid, and captures the matter of factness and reality of the dreams. I use the tiny Canon G9, filming on 15

frames a second, and love the way the images have increased texture, and are obviously 'home-made'.

## **Personal Health Crisis**

During the period of these dreams, a problem with my lungs emerged. I had become breathless, and found it hard to move. Getting to the end of the corridor had become too far. I was drenched in sweat. I was not in pain. The doctor sent me to the hospital, which X-rayed my chest. I was phoned by the consultant, and told to return to the hospital for immediate further tests. He said I was to remain within 30 minutes travel of the hospital until they had diagnosed what was causing the cloudiness in my lungs. I went through extensive tests including an MRI scan. I was tested for cancer, tuberculosis, asthma, and various pulmonary disorders I had never heard of. I seemed clear of all these diseases, but my lungs were congested and the doctors refused to discharge me.

I gradually became well enough to return to normal life. I was surprised by the impact of the doctor's concern. I felt very aggressive. The fear of dying from the dream took on a new and more enraging urgency. I also felt depressed. It seemed as though my body was falling into the path laid out in my dream.

The depression deepened as I read more volumes of Jung (Jung et al 1958). There seemed so many signs pointing to inevitable death. I re-read his description of *adumbratio* the shadow that death casts into the unconscious, and how it can surface in our dreams. Elizabeth Kubler Ross had also written

about decathexis, the withdrawing from the familial and emotional relations as death approaches.(Kübler-Ross 1982) Both of these seemed exact descriptions of what was happening to me.

I began to lose energy. I began to disassociate from life, and from my living body. My body often felt on automatic, carrying out tasks when its only desire was to lie down. I often found myself falling asleep, suddenly and completely, as soon as I lay down (for instance in the bath) or if I sat down to listen to a lecture or watch a film.

Diary July 2007

*After the edit driving back to clean the house I felt so ill. Ling (a student at the art school) saw the rushes as I was transferring them today. She said 'it is as if you're dead already - your life is flashing past you at great speed. ...It's like fiction, it's so real.'*

*I didn't want to admit how ill I actually feel. It's the feeling of withdrawing from the world. Close to being sick, collapse. My physical self is here on automatic, before I have to sick up and lie down. I cleaned and cleaned. Get so scared I am dying, that I am fundamentally not well. Don't want to stop living. Want better health, some vitality. Will go back to bed and sleep.*

I decided to tell my sister, Gwen, about the dream. As soon as the doctors felt I could fly to New York I went to visit her in the States. I set up the interview carefully, and told her my dream. She didn't believe it. She didn't want to respond. It was a bit of an anti-climax. We filmed and filmed, with the intense mirroring of two sisters exploring similar themes in two different

mediums. I was enormously reassured by Gwen's robust dismissal of the death sentence dream. She reminded me that the relationship I had with Arthur had been emotionally and at the end, physically, violent, and was not surprised that he should enter my dream psyche with a message of death.

My lungs were operating at around 60% capacity. I had refused to undergo the operation the doctors recommended, to get to the bottom of whatever was causing the inflammation. I knew it would mean hospital for several days, and around six weeks recovery, and would not in itself heal me. I was able to walk and film, and went for checkups every three months. Fifteen weeks before my birthday, I began to think about what I would need to complete the filming of this year.

Nell had learnt to tell fortunes by palm-reading at school, and was lying in the hammock in great light. I expected a fun sequence for me and Nell, and thought actually that she would tell me I had a long life in front of me, as I had heard her say to others. The first thing she said was "you wake up dead". The sound was not turned up high enough for this to be usable, but when we turned it up she went on to say you have a happy life, but a short one, I was very scared. I don't show it at all. I see on screen that my decision to live two realities has developed into a talent for dissembling.

I realised I needed to do something more proactive than simply hope for my 49<sup>th</sup> birthday and that it would all be over.

I kept putting off my thought that I should animate my death. I felt very uneasy about making a model of myself and seeing myself die. Maybe I was becoming superstitious, but I feared

that the manoeuvre could backfire and I could make my own death so real it might be more likely to happen. There was some evidence that supported this fear. Arnold Mindell describes the danger of directly informing the patient that he would die shortly.

staff should realize that the way they inform their patient has the effect of a hypnotic induction and could be murderous...To tell a patient 'you will die soon' is a form of murder (Mindell, 1994:20). Visions, dreams and myths use our physical bodies as a dramatic stage upon which the individual organs are actors. (Mindell, 1994:39)

I became seriously worried that I was making my death sentence dream into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## **Desperate Measures**

I had to do something about the dream. Psycho-analysis had not been able to reduce the fear I had. I considered going to hypnotherapy. I discussed this with one of my colleagues. She suggested I see a shaman and told me about a shamanic centre in Edinburgh, which she recommended. She made me an appointment.

I knew a little about shamanism already. It had been referred to by the Mindells, and Arnold Mindell wrote a book called *The Shaman's Body*. I had decided shamanism was a catch all term for a particularly graphic sort of empathy. It seemed very like psychotherapy to me, but less safe. I agreed to go and meet Claudia, a shamanic practitioner from Brazil, and talk

about my dream. When I arrived at the centre I showed Claudia the horse dream sequence on my laptop.

*DIARY October 07*

*Tuesday.*

*I saw Claudia yesterday. She asked such intelligent questions. I was hanging on her every word. I filmed everything and was conscious how good it was – taking us to a new stage in the film, when I realised the sound wasn't working. We have to ask permission, she said. I see her for a shamanic journey the day tomorrow.*

*Thursday morning*

*I'm scared of today. I think I'm going to come out of this shamanic journey changed. I will bring a blanket and a small thing in my pocket. Who prospers? The good question asked by the Hopi grandfather. The villages that do all these ceremonies should be the ones to prosper, but, he says, they are dying out.*

*So let me be open, but not foolish.*

I filmed the shamanic journey, putting the camera on the tripod at the end of the bed. I had not expected it to have such a powerful effect. When Claudia said it was over, I was sure of two things: that I had almost died, and that, having gone through the journey, I was not now going to die. I felt the shamanic experience had changed the dream.

## **Closure**

At this point I realised I had a film, which offered an ending, that I was going to live, and I had a 49<sup>th</sup> birthday party to prepare. I needed a producer and an editor. I could no longer continue alone. I needed to raise some finance. I cut a one

minute trailer and took the film to the Meetmarket at Sheffield Documentary Festival, and got a strong positive response. I found several producers, and immediate offers of funding. It was overwhelming. To ground myself, I flung myself into the cutting of the film as much as I could. I needed to know that their expectations and excitement about the story would be met. This was a very emotional time for me as I was also coping with what had seemed an enormous experience – this feeling I had almost died, and that the shamanic journey had saved my life. I asked the Edinburgh College of Art graduate, Ling Lee, whose responses to my footage when she saw me transferring rushes I had found so intriguing, if she could edit with me.

## Editing

I plunged into party preparations, filming and editing. I lost a stone in weight, working long hours. I hardly wrote in my journal.

*DIARY November 4th*

*Putting the story together based on the home-movie footage is like assembling a fiction film from almost unlimited rushes, all of which are perfectly acted, because they are not acted at all. Presence takes the place of performance/action. Self-contained, self-preoccupied behaviour is what I love to film. Nell crossing her leg and lying across the window seat is so beautiful.*

It seemed as though the footage could be shaped in any way I wanted. I had a beginning – the two dreams, and a frame – the twelve months of my 48<sup>th</sup> year. The rest was simply the

pleasure of looking. Bringing the landscapes next to the children (who did not know) next to my husband (who did) generated the material out of which we could construct something, a way to explore death through the dreams.

Was I involved in storytelling or was the essay form more useful to us? I was not sure. Ling and I spent hours working out what the themes of the documentary were. I knew I needed to stay close to the actual chronology of the dreams and events. We made a card index of all the themes, and stuck it to the wall in a long line of potential sequences. It became quickly apparent that it was the structure of a five hour film, and very conceptual. At this stage I was not sure about what sort of film I wanted to make. I knew what I wanted to put in it, and I knew that audiences were important. Ling and I cut many sequences, covering all the themes of the film, and all the events that had happened to me.

## **Film Essay**

There is a considerable body of writing devoted to auto-ethnography and the use of narrative and other fictive tropes in life writing. Borrowing concepts from literature and psychoanalysis , Greg Clingham notes that

The basic recollective structure of psychoanalysis, in which the past through repetition, seeks re-employment in a newly imagined narrative...make for the constitutive and redemptive functions of biographical memory.  
(Clingham 2002)

Film theorists have been exercised by both the ethics and the epistemology of auto-ethnography. James Clifford's **The**

**Predicament of Culture** brings concepts from art and literature to ethnography and sets out the complexity of cultural references which have replaced earlier and more naïve description of 'cultural difference', arguing that self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of any objective description of the subject of study. By reinterpreting the founding texts of psychoanalysis, Lacan re-equipped Saussure's notion of the linguistic sign to theorize the action of the unconscious, the schisms internal to subjectivity, and the perpetual slippage of human meaning. The Lacanian doctrine: "The unconscious is structured like a language" refers to the language of unprocessed and therefore unconscious experience as written on the body, that appear as uncertain childhood memories, or in the storytelling or mythmaking that forms each individual's own history.

The extent to which the 'real' for Lacan is that which has still to find concrete expression in language, I seek to evoke through the visual. What I have in common with a Lacanian approach is a refusal to take what was happening to me in my dreams at face value. I sought help to both interpret what was out of my awareness, whilst also allowing myself to depict – and extend – my experience beyond the literal image towards something .

A central aspect of Lacanian interpretation is based on gaps. The gap between where I was – facing death - and where I desired to be – on the other side of this, I tackle in visual language and poetic form where the analyst might focus on linguistic exchange.

Where a Lacanian analyst might seek to offer some sort of stable meaning when working with a patient's psychosis, I

emerged from the shamanic encounter with a fluidity and plurality that in some ways deepened the crisis I faced. In hindsight this was probably a necessary unhooking from the rigid and literal structures that I had dropped into as a result of the three dreams.

Initially the structure of a film essay seemed the most appropriate vehicle to carry this complexity of allusion to the self, to inscribe the self on a work that aimed to express a gradual immersion in the unconscious. A film essay is often defined as a structure that allows the form to be dictated by the content. Noel Burch, talking about the documentary essay, described it:

The cinematic revolution now in progress is based on what is essentially a very simple idea: that a subject can engender form and that to choose a subject is to make an aesthetic choice. (Burch 1981)

*Essai* (from the French for an attempt) seemed an accurate description of what I was doing, week after week. An essay differs from a story in that it is not limited to plot, character, or a defined time and place. The essay allows conceptual links to be made, and an argument to be developed. Meditation on a theme is substituted for plot, disunity of time, space, tone, materials, style is allowed; there is space for self-criticism and self-reflexivity. This is visible in the camerawork and editing – in particular, the camera does not anticipate the action, and the editing is less visceral and action-orientated and more varied.

The essay documentary differs from educational or promotional film in that it articulates the viewpoint of its author. An example of an essay film that I had personally loved is **Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse**, by Agnes Varda. In her first playful, engagement with digital cameras, Varda sets out to explore the legal, social, metaphorical meanings of the gleanings that the French are legally allowed to take for free from the fields after harvest. We meet gleaners of potatoes and grapes; artists who take from the daily garbage harvest, and finally explore the filmmaker herself, as she pulls together her footage taken from across France. It is liberating, intellectually exciting and joyous. If it had been structured as a story, we would have focussed on one or two of the characters that intersect with each other. More attention would have been paid to how and where these characters meet.

Montaigne, the sixteenth century French nobleman who is credited with popularising the term *essai*, sums up its appeal in his assertion that to understand humanity you must first of all understand one human. In **Essays** from 1580, he sets out to give as precise an account as he can of his daily life and his daily reflections. Even more usefully for my film, he circles again and again to the essays as his mental preparations for his own death. He states that his essays spring from his desire to create something

for the pleasure of my relatives and friends so that, when they have lost me – which they soon must – they may recover some features of my character and disposition, and thus keep the memory they have of me more completely and vividly alive. (Montaigne 1958)

Montaigne is concerned with notions of death – of what is a good death, and the difference in death between the peasants,

who he says never think about it, and the nobles, whose anxiety over death, he decides, in the end is unhealthy. He quotes Caesar approvingly, 'He grieves more than necessary who grieves before it is necessary (Seneca Letters xcv111 Montaigne 1958:330)

Inspired by Montaigne I spent one day detailing and chronicling (trying not to edit or interpret or evaluate) my activities, hour by hour. Should some of the texture of this be the foundation for the film structure? I include an extract here.

## Work Day Chronicle

Thursday 25 September 2008

*Took my little camera and went into the woods. Found the same fox path I remember. Smell at entrance. Moss lit up the tree shadow vivid green. Filmed up, down. Pan past the needles and down onto mushrooms broken by deer. Lots of hoof prints, where they jump the drainage ditches. Walked further in, bent to under 3 foot high. Gently curving ditch (natural?) with vivid moss bringing a sensuous curve of vibrant yellow green that was lovely. Will put it on the computer and see which works. Hard to know if tracking shots are wobbly or thriller-esque or great.*

*Walked to the horses and caught Mungo. His skin seems tight. Frost night before last and I didn't rug him. Has he caught a cold? Sheep lying neatly down on the only bare stone skelping bit left on the path. I guess it's driest. Led the horses down, pushing the sheep in front of us. Slow. Dense woolly backs wobbling along, with as much dignity as they can.*

*Filmed Mungo's mane, trying for a slower look that leads deeper into his back. Looked a bit like the forest. Dipping into the undergrowth. Little camera can't cope with the contrast. Will try macro on big camera.*

*Came back and soaked our own potatoes for food tonight. Dillon has run away (into the forest?) again. Chopped fruit and had it with yoghurt and honey outside, admiring the clematis, that only this, its third year, has been able to flower. Lilies fisted and that big showy waxy cream blush is brown. Delphiniums making a second spire of blue.*

*Plugged up the computer and the date and time need resetting again. It doesn't find the photo library. I remember I took everything off it so I could transcribe the science rushes. I find the external drive and connect it. The computer goes into deep contemplation. I make a cup of tea and clear away the ginger to the compost and the apple cores for the horses. The dog is still not back.*

*OK. Have to set up a new photo library. The shot of Mungo's mane moving down is great. Just what I wanted from the animation. So I can get it with a tiny G9 camera. Amazing. Just need to look harder. And use a different lens. But contrast is a huge problem for the tree shots. Don't get the soft glowing moss – it's all burnt out and streaky margins. Need other camera and low contrast setting. First movements should be almost imperceptible. Tree, branch, scale.*

*Trying it out with voice-over from my sleepless night. Tilt down from up showing abundant green spruce needles to the moss is good, ending on dream. Goes from the conventional to the odd, conscious to mysterious. Although it's also nice to look up. Macro pan spruce twig is also good.*

*Going through the hair by layer is good. You really see the mud and the dandruff. Like the twig – you see the cobwebs wrapped round, blowing strands. They're alike, mane and trees. Show this?*

*OK. Big camera now. Light is intermittently good. Still no return of the dog. Shit. Do I film now or go to the forest to check on him. (He could be lying a ditch? Taken to the police station? O.K. I will cycle to the forest). First prepare the camera and erase old footage. God I hope its all downloaded and backed up properly. Need to put back-up hard-drives in separate locations. Only 90*

*minutes before go into art-school, dropping the bike at the bus stop for Lotte. Gordon is here – must tell him that Davy is coming tomorrow.*

*The light is too good. I'll film now and take a chance on Dillon.*

*He's back. Muddy and lame.*

*Filmed trees. Got good pillowy green unexpected below forest. Also got to grips with the macro lens.*

There were many differences between Montaigne's reflections and mine. Colour, sensuality, and immediate sense impressions play a much larger role in my mental life. This difference was reflected in the sequences I preferred in the edit suite. This had been a useful exercise. It is an effort, to verbalise experiences that normally pass unremarked, even unnoticed. But the preoccupation with visual and sensual detail that I discovered from this exercise were qualities I wanted in the final film. Perhaps they could contribute towards my research aim of making room for the audience in the film. I reasoned they might work in a few ways: the beauty of my surroundings and my family would be a counterpoint to the abstraction of the dreams and the idea of death; giving screen time to the daily routines of myself as a mother and housewife would give breathing space to the film, and allow some of the audience to identify with me. There was a third argument: focussing on the visual and sensual detail of my life gave me entry to a more oblique style of storytelling, where the image contains more than I can control, or even account for. I hoped the very humility of the images might invest the film with a power beyond my conscious agenda. The parameters of the

cinematic language I need to make this film were becoming clear.

DIARY October 2008

*Thinking about the difference between the idea stage – conceptual, lends itself easily to many connections, lists, bullet points (of the treatment, the funding application) and the thing that matters in the edit suite, The forming outwards, image by image, that is the lexicon of storytelling. The image creates the conditions for the following image.*

## **Story**

I realised I didn't really know what story, in documentary, is. I used the term, and talked a lot about stories, as people do, when they can mean ideas, or the meaning or the issue. It became important for me to know what story is. Brian Dunnigan, Head of Screenwriting at the London Film School, argues that stories are ubiquitous:

The appeal of storytelling as a form of communication and entertainment comes precisely from this ability to excite then resolve tension and restore equilibrium in a neat and satisfying way. Stories are all pervasive in our culture: news stories, soaps, tabloid scandals, medical histories, workplace gossip and the endless stream of movies, videos, and DVDs that frame our dreams of memory, adventure, and escape. We are storytelling creatures who seek to report experience, clarify tangled emotion, define and amuse ourselves through narrative: jokes, anecdotes, myth, romance, parable, folktale, history, and fiction. (Dunnigan 2004:4)

As I spent more time shaping the material in the edit room, I noticed how the facts of my personal encounters with death,

particularly the dreams, seemed archetypal. Marie Louise Von Franz, often described as Jung's most important successor, states that

We cannot manipulate our dreams. They are, as it were, the voice of nature within us. The question therefore, is the manner in which nature, through dreams, prepares us for death. Since dreams depict a completely objective psychic 'nature event' uninfluenced by the wishes of the ego...it looks as if certain basic archetypal structures exist in the depths of the soul which regularly come to the fore during the process of dying. (Von Franz 1991:13)

I was already familiar with Jung's notion of *adumbratio*, the ripples sent out at the onset of death, through dreams and small waking signals, to alert the psyche to prepare for death. I had read Jung avidly, until I got simply too scared to read any more. Not only did my dreams contain iconic figures – the horse preparing for its own death, then dying; the father of my oldest child warning me that I would be dead within one year; my own death on the back of the horse; but the way they made me think about my life took on an archetypal structure. The heroine of the story, lucky in love, is warned of grave danger that will make her lose all she loves, and sets off on a quest to change the dream. Can she do it within the twelve months she has left?

It seemed, paradoxically, that when I accepted the primary definition of the essay – form defined by content, the content would itself suggest story structure.

Dunnigan defines how stories work:

At its simplest a story elicits our curiosity: someone is in trouble and we want to know what happens next, we identify with his or her predicament (we all have our troubles), we want to know how it ends. A story entertains by posing a question and finding complicating and surprising ways of holding back the answer: plotting, ellipsis, parallel action, multiple perspectives - are all designed to keep us in suspense. The minimum story is structured like a joke with a beginning, middle and twist in the tale end. (Dunnigan 2004:8)

I decided to consciously try storytelling as a structure. I had a main character, a problem, a location, and a quest to find a solution. These were the basic building blocks of stories. I was also drawn to the effect stories have on audiences. I knew myself well enough to know that I enjoyed telling an anecdote to hook a friend's attention. I could tell my story as an anecdote. But could I then also bring in the conceptual freedom from the essay form, to allow me to explore what I had learnt about death and dying?

#### DIARY 2008

*I'm left with the problem of having too much to say and not being able to get it across without being boring/losing the audience in intellectual discussion they don't seem to understand.*

*There's so much craft to this storytelling. I'm embarrassed by how many things I have to try out, full of enthusiasm, until I see them in place, and then have to start again, because they are taking the film in a direction I can't bear. It's amazing to me the long distance, the gap, between my ideas, even my footage, and the voice-overs I write and then how they all seem once they are put together in the emotional and intellectual journey that is a film. That's why I have to do so many versions. And the technical complexity of doing all this on high definition and through computers is so stressful. Without Ling I am totally lost.*

*And what often works is just a bit of waving grass, or a daffodil in the snow. But I always want to make these images work hard – attach them to the intellectual discoveries that I think are so important – and that when I tell people they say this is great – you must put this in your film.*

*I'm heartened by Jann Martel – it has to be emotional and intellectual. It is worth keeping going and trying to meld them together. But very hard work and frustrating when I can't get other people enthused about the ideas.*

This tension between ideas, and the development of an argument, and storytelling, which at its simplest, foregrounds the action, became the motif of the months I spent editing. My work notes are a litany of complaints against the storytelling form, and a series of attempts to stretch its limitations.

#### DIARY 2008

*Story is working out what and how much to say and show to make the audience want to know the next bit.*

*Story is something you find out by interrogating the rushes, not by writing at the outset.*

*I am both constricted and liberated by the way I am focussing on very conventional story telling. Time and again I find these beautiful bits of thought that I want to include in the film and know I cannot. For instance, I found this observation in Pogue's **Dominion of the Dead**, where he demonstrates the centrality of death to humanity, by describing how human beings housed their dead before they housed themselves (Harrison, 2003):*

*“humanitas comes first and properly from humando’, burying. (Vico New Science 1725: 12)...As human beings we are born of the dead – of the regional ground they occupy, of the languages they inhabited, of the worlds they brought into being, of the many institutional,*

*legal, cultural and psychological legacies that, through us, connect them to the unborn”*

*This speaks to footage that could be in the film – in the funeral oration – ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust” which I shot at my grandmother’s funeral in St. Andrews, in a beautiful graveyard above the sea, and it could have been included. However, the meditative tone it would have provided would have run counter to the dramatic pace of the narrative. Each time I attempt to bring in a slightly abstract piece of conceptual reflection, the film loses pace, and I watch the audience glaze over. Even I lose interest. I cannot move from these abstract observations which are so satisfying on the page to their inclusion in film. It’s a loss, and a severe limitation on what, in terms of writing, would have been a pleasurablely ruminative and entirely relevant section in a piece on death.*

*Story structure is forced on me by my material, chosen, after much trial and error, after many short films and sequences produced. Why does ‘story’ achieve my aims? I have already described how it limits my inclination to philosophise, to brood, to stare at a situation, or a word, or a line of poetry, has been jettisoned. What makes this abrupt amputation worthwhile for me?*

The answer to my question here of what I gain when I relinquish my pleasurable philosophising, lies in the audience response. I did several test screenings of different cuts during the course of the PhD. Only when I cut the material down to events, did the audience become fully involved. Only then did they bring their full selves into the act of watching. The reflection in the film is their reflection. The philosophising happens, invariably, afterwards, between themselves or with me, by email, by letter, in conversation. They are left with a desire to think, to respond to the images.

It is only in this sharply limited form of story telling that I have been able to create a tautness, to pull an intensity of attention from them, to provoke an emotional response (tears, laughter, fear, horror, anguish) that means they have made this story their own. That was my specific research aim: to create a film about death where the audience make the death their own experience – their own metaphor, their own rumination, meditation, in whatever form and with whatever specific details become most relevant to them.

I have had discussions with people about their dreams, about ghosts, about the death of the planet, about the menopause, about their parents dying, their fear of dying themselves, their fear of their children dying, of the role of animals, the apparatus of the brain and the nature of objective reality. These are all things I have thought, and thought hard about, and some of them have found a pleasing life in my written reflections, but as I carried on with the test screenings I made the choice finally that they would not enter the film as overt images or words.

My aim was refined to this: I hoped that the background, the archaeology of research behind this conventional story structure would provide a density, an intensity, that does not require literal images or words, but is evoked instead through layers of juxtaposed images, and in the choices of how a sequence leads to another. It should also be evoked by the pared down availability of the main character, allowing the audience to see the situation through her/their eyes: i.e. elide the distinction between themselves and her, by focusing on what she sees, rather than looking at her.

My subsidiary research question was whether this form of storytelling would, or could, bypass the rational. How does storytelling function for the audience? Why is it that the structure of a dramatic arc of narrative has this effect on audiences, rather than, say, an extended visual metaphor? The subject matter is more or less the same.

I hypothesised that part of the power of the story has something to do with the fact that I am not telling the viewer how to interpret the image. I present images with a focus on the fact, the 'what happened' at that moment. I move on to the next fact, in the tradition of picaresque novels, or indeed, the **Thousand and One Nights** (Burton, *trans*,1973) – another story told to stay alive. These stories are told each night by a woman to prevent a man from killing her. Each night he delays her death so he can hear the next bit of the narrative. Is this archetypal story? Stories sneak in on the audience, operating from a position of no overt power. They do not declaim or prove or demonstrate. They offer, rather than demand.

By not telling the viewer how to interpret the image – by not giving them my philosophic interpretation of the significance, or meaning, of what they are seeing, my hope is that the viewer will bring their own meaning, their own frame of reference and personal connotations, to that particular image or sequence.

The physical act produced by editing, by the juxtaposition of one image/sequence to the next, will be my main intervention. It is through editing that I suggest my particular interpretation, my particular meaning-making. Because of the physical quality of film, and the changes of location and elided time, new events unfold rapidly, so for the viewer it is as though they

are living in a world where things are happening to them with heightened intensity and at a great pace. My aim is that the audience travel on the year's journey with me, even that they identify so closely with the process they see me go through that they feel it is their experience, their story, although it is clearly my story.

What is the relation between their experience and my story?

The key is that I am not interpreting the images for them, but there is something else that comes into play. What is the key to the pleasure and urgency of stories and storytelling? Is it that we are hard-wired for stories, with neurological pathways laid down by generations of story listening. Is it how we first learned about the world? But surely straight information is more useful in terms of preserving the species? Stories work on a different channel to information. We can only take so much information before we feel we have information overload. But we have a greater capacity for stories. But neither my material, nor my involvement with it, are perfect story material. I swing between emotion and intellect, story and essay. I chronicled my attempts to construct a structure for the film, and found a sort of pattern in it:

### **Finding Form**

- I am energised by an idea
- I explore it with words (literature, which I interrogate with words) I engage in the world, through people, and subject their experiences and my footage to the conceptual scrutiny created by the first entirely verbal

investigation, which produces intellectual excitement and revelations.

- I begin to cut sequences. The resulting film lacks whatever it is I am looking for to match the excitement and revelation (is boring?) (offends me?). I get confused and stop working on it.
- I dream. I notice objects, stories, pictures. I gaze at them. I spend hours in guilty 'snatched' time for the pleasure of being in their company. Or the world makes a demand on me – such as to respond to Em's request for a 9 o'clock ritual, or a weeping woman in the party toilets.
- In spite of myself, feeling I am playing truant to the real work, I begin to spend more and more time on these rewarding areas. My dreams increase in intensity. I have to find a new way to film this.
- I film something based on these compelling images/place/sensation. I like it. I show it to people. It doesn't work for them.
- I start again, but with an intellectual excitement that is now digested by further experience, and that has filtered into my unconscious. My dreams have been shuffling these problems, different parts of me have responded – the child, the superego, the depressive, the megalomaniac, the introvert, the tantrum thrower.
- I look into the dreams and find a new form, a new structure. I follow up and further investigate the content, and get further intellectual excitement.
- I make a new cut. It begins to work. Then I get overly intellectually excited again and again produce a piece of work whose intellectual focus, laden with information, weighs too heavily against the emotional, (spiritual?) unconscious flow of the work.
- Again I get depressed, stop. Again my unconscious takes over, and the world and my dreaming brain offer me escapes, which guiltily, seduced by their pleasure, I

eventually take. And again, I re-enter the filmmaking room.

Reflecting on this chronicle of my creative process, I see that I swing between intellectual excitement and the visceral pleasure of the senses – looking, in particular. Each alone is insufficient. The only process that produces the sort of film I want to make is a slow organic iterative re-imagining of each approach. The pleasures of the head must be integrated into the pleasures of the body, and the pleasures of the conscious intellect must percolate into the knowing of the unconscious. It is a process I have to live through. It is not an aim I can get to by hard intellectual labour or will. I have to go through an emotional set of stages, each of which has its own limits and offers its own insights.

Brian Dunnigan refers to the etymology of story and narrative:

Narrative is derived from the Latin *gnarus* or "knowing" and story from the Welsh root "to see": in oral cultures story implied guidance, direction, instruction, knowledge. The storyteller was originally a seer or teacher who guided the souls of his listeners through the world of mystery which is also this world; the angelic space between the divine and the chaotic; Blake's eternity in an hour. The oral storyteller suspends time; in the immediacy of his presence and the improvised interplay of teller and audience the story is alive, immediate and eternal; through developing patterns of meaning and catharsis the listener is released from time and his human self: the pleasure is both aesthetic and emotional (Dunnigan 2004:12).

When stories were told with words, this must have been a huge achievement. Now that we have access to image and

sound, the audience response he defines is almost a definition of the cinematic experience. 'Suspending time', making images 'immediate and eternal' are generously donated with the simple act of filming. It could be argued that the last one hundred years has brought us to a new position from which to interrogate the act of storytelling. Cinema can produce, easily and almost by definition, a sort of knowing that is both visceral and intellectual.

However, as I described in the literature review, critics differ in how this they define the 'knowing' produced by documentary. For Nicholls:

Documentary realism aligns itself with an epistophilia...a pleasure in knowing...a stronger effect on our social imagination and sense of cultural identity. Documentary calls for the elaboration of an epistemology and axiology more than of an erotics (Nichols, 1991)

Michael Renov takes issue with this emphasis on the intellectual and social emphasis, calling it 'deeply rationalist', and brings forward insights from psychotherapy, arguing that:

The documentary image functions in relation to both knowledge and desire, evidence and lure, with neither term exerting exclusive control. Rather, I would echo the Nietzschean position – that knowledge is produced on the stage where instincts, impulses, desires, fears and the will to appropriate struggle against one another. (Renov, 2004:101)

Renov's description of 'knowing' seems to include both conscious and unconscious knowledge, both empirically verifiable knowledge and another sort of knowledge, which has

been frequently referred to in the thesis. This second form of knowledge requires an experience, an observer, or participant. It links psychoanalysis and film: as Walter Benjamin says:

The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.  
(Benjamin 1969)

Recalling Frederiksen's discussion of symbolic cinema, and his quotation from Jung that 'Whether a thing is a symbol or not depends chiefly upon the attitude of the observing consciousness', I suspect that this second form of knowing will be most evident in the audience's response to the film.<sup>3</sup>

### **Challenges peculiar to this first person film**

There were several areas within the parameters of first person filming that I experienced as difficult to solve. This was the first time I had put myself in front of the camera, and I found it almost unbearable to bring every source of the film back to myself – my dreams, my life, my camerawork, my direction, my voice. I got very sick of myself. I found it hard to see and hear

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware that deeper structures concerning how 'I' observe myself in terms of my various subjectivities could reward further study. The multiple selves of being a mother, daughter, science film-maker, personal film-maker are different from the fractured, (or fragmented) selves that emerge from the dreams and the shamanic journey. I see that the very clarity and cogency of what emerged as my storytelling, more akin to the dramatic structures and audience rewards/satisfaction of fiction film-making and how it seeks to control the viewer's emotional response, do not include a critique of this 'coherence' and apparent lack of contradiction within its schema. The shamanic journey in part acts to de-centre the discourse that has already amassed some power. My hope is that what results is a multiplicity of possibilities rather than the more 'authoritative' story had the film omitted the shamanic journey. In this sense it opens to the possibility of Walter Benjamin's idea that every work of art contains within it the tools to criticise it. I would hope that part of the function of *The Edge of Dreaming* will be to help question some of the givens of contemporary documentary practice.

myself at the centre of a film and to take on the responsibility of being the driver of the action. I looked at how other first person film-makers dealt with it. Jennifer Fox, in **Flying**, wanted her edge to show, wanted to be brutally honest, but also wanted to distance herself from her on screen persona, to construct her. So she was called Fox.

Interviewed by SeattleEst:

Int: Do people feel like they know you after watching *Flying*? You put a lot of yourself out there.

J.F. I think they think so, but in some ways they do and in some ways they don't. They're able to know the private part of me that I made public. I didn't put any bars on how I'd let the camera into my life, but if you meet me, you meet a different person, because I'm much more protective of my privacy, like I would be in business. So you won't meet the person you see in the film, who is actually much more of who I really am, or at least the inside part of me. If you meet me, you meet less of an intimate person. (Fox 2007)

I also found the same dichotomy. I had to construct a character for the screen, and the character was more intimately me than most people would ever be allowed to meet. But I had a different response to Jennifer Fox. As noted in my earlier diary, I found myself as a character a bit wan. I didn't have the chutzpah of Jennifer Fox, and looked worried, mostly, on screen.

I came to the conclusion that I was a lost cause. Instead of filming me, the camera would have to film what I saw. This seemed liberating, aesthetically, and provided the extra effort and ingenuity required for more a more interesting film. I realised the blander I appeared, the more the audience could project on to me. Unfortunately, as soon as I seemed self-

conscious, or tired, or looked unattractive, it was a disincentive for the audience to identify with my predicament.

I found this depressing. Does the screen elevate attractiveness to a sort of profundity of meaning? Further, the more the film foregrounded narrative tension, and therefore began to inhabit the conventions more usually associated with fiction, the less successful I seemed as a main character. On the other hand, I was in an interesting situation, and had come up with (I thought) genuinely intellectually exciting things to say about dreams and death. I accepted I did not want to make an essay film that would appeal only to an erudite audience. I had to navigate these obstacles in the main character and find a way of storytelling that would bring the audience with me.

## **Ethics in First Person Filming**

The problems I encountered were not only my inadequacy as a main character. I was very comfortable in my familiar role as cameraperson and director, documenting the changing landscape, the events that happened around me, and producing images that brought me intense satisfaction. Although aware of the nexus of ethical writing on autobiography, I found myself in agreement with Tony Dowmont's conclusion that a 'sincere' attempt to understand his subjects' lives, and 'to come to terms with and understand' his own life and self as sincerely as possible was, in the end, all he could achieve. This focus on self-scrutiny is informed by Dowmont's reading of Foucault.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> He developed this from Foucault's critique of the confessional, where he argues that the autobiographical act involves the presence of the authoritative other: 'confession as coercion'. Drawn from

A more complex issue ethically arises from my focus on my family. I loved knowing I was creating an archive of our family life. However, as Lotte went through the self-consciousness of adolescence she became increasingly wary of the camera and vociferous about her right not to be filmed, to view all rushes, to veto any images she deemed unacceptable. This had a knock-on effect on nine-year old Nell, who began to copy Lotte's guerrilla tactics, freezing to a statue or acting 'the perfect child' for the camera. I worried that I would have no-one to film, or that the family were reinventing themselves as a protest against being filmed, so that my 'archive' would be an archive of a 'fake' family.

Michelle Citron notes:

It is in this dynamic relationship that exists between the media work and the artist's life that the ethical dimension dwells. Autobiography can be dangerous for others, particularly those on whom the video or filmmaker turns her camera. Lovers, spouses, children, parents and friends can find themselves suddenly appropriated as subjects into the autobiographical artist's celluloid or tape presentation of 'self' (Citron 1999:273).

I tried different strategies to make Lotte comfortable with the filming in the house. I stopped filming her. I took out the bits she found most excruciating. I asked her to film me. I did not

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Nietzsche's discussion of the cultural manifestations of the will to power, Foucault, through looking at power and institutions' impact on what we perceive as the other developed what he described as the 'ethical self', which is the result of a constant process of self-examination, refusing to acquiesce to the sovereignty of any one system of thought, and problematising the rules and institutions which can construct our identity unless we are scrupulously self-aware.

want to explain to her why I felt it was so important to film her. As I began to edit the rushes together, I begged her to allow me to keep the sequence in when she teaches Dillon the 'dead dog' trick. She argues that she had taught it to him previously, and that she did not teach it to him as a response to George's death. I had never seen him do it before, and she did seem to be teaching him that day. We had different ways of interpreting the footage, and different memories. I changed the voice-over to something she could live with, and when she saw its effect on audiences she agreed it could stay. She thought that section worked, and even that it was probably going to be a good film.

I worried that I had failed to represent the wit and comic banter of both Lotte and Peter. They both became self-conscious on camera. This meant that, as characters in the film, they were not as interesting as the people I knew them to be. Peter seemed cold at times, and Lotte seemed to be always closing doors. I dealt with this by filming much more than I needed, and by handing the camera to them to make it an integral part of our lives. But the truth was, they were sick of filming by the end of the year, and only their good nature allowed me to finish filming.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As Larry Gross says, (Gross 2003) filming ones own family members brings in extra complications, as the film-maker has four responsibilities: to self, audience, subject and profession. When the subject is unsophisticated in terms of media exposure (as, for instance, my children were), the film-maker wields an uncomfortable power and furthermore, is invested in rewarding the family's behaviour that produces the most coherent film. On the other hand, the focus of my film was clearly about me, and neither my husband nor my children's lives were much affected by their exposure in the film beyond some of their friends thinking we lived in a cool house. The excitement of appearing on television was rapidly overtaken by the more relevant charisma of X factor and Glee.

It was very important to me that no-one in my family felt unfairly represented. I considered asking Peter to be a narrative voice in the film, as I was. This would allow him to put his own point of view, and also add to the dramaturgy. He was quite interested in this. I speculated on how it could work, writing an introduction based on the voice-over I had used for the first cuts:

### **Introductory sequence for two voices**

Image: woman on a horse galloping in the hills. Same woman with a camera looking at orange water.

Sensual stroking of red horse.

*Amy: I want to tell you about the strangest year of my life. A year I almost died, and came back to the living.*

(visual foretaste of hospital, shaman 'it will not be easy')

*Peter: And I want to tell you what it was like living with her. I'm her husband.*

*Amy: It started with my 48<sup>th</sup> birthday. At the beginning of that year, I thought I had everything: one, two three kids; a husband I can't wait to be alone with; a great walk to the bus; a house in the hills; five fields, two horses, a dog and a cat. I even get to make films for a living, although sometimes the things I discover are terrifying.*

Scientist sync: "This lake is dead. There is no oxygen in it because of the toxic run off. It doesn't have the chemical composition any more to support life"

*Amy: I make films and I raise a family. What I don't have, is time, and money.*

*Pete and I have raised three kids together. We've moved six times in the last twelve years. And ended up here under a huge sky and a huge mortgage.*

*We think it's beautiful, but it means too many arrangements.*

*Peter: I write my dreams down every morning. Its part of my job. Amy doesn't remember her dreams. But she remembered this one.*

*Amy: One night I dreamt of my horse George. He stood opposite me with a long red coat and said: 'Are you filming? Are you ready to film? I'm going to fall to the left.' I woke up and went out in the dark. I found him immediately.*

*Peter: She was shaking when she woke me up. She'd dropped her camera and broken it. It was getting light. She wanted me to come with her. I found her another camera, and we went out together.*

There are several points to be made about the script above. It is dense with event: evolving its ideas too rapidly if I wanted to maintain the sensuality of the filmic moment. It also represents a moment when I took story writing well beyond documentary. Even although it is based on the exact events that happened, in its conceptual leaps (between family, dreams, earth science) and its pleasure in the two- handed building of a story, it took my account of my experience out of cinema and into the framework of theatre. I wanted to remind my audiences they were watching a documentary, and that what they were seeing was an authentic account of my year.

## **Too Close to Judge**

A third problem I had to deal with in making a first person film was that my judgment was clouded by my presence in the film. Not only was this the first personal film I had attempted, I had too much information and too much history that I found fascinating and wanted to include. I found it increasingly hard to remain fresh in the edit, and to remember what had once seemed good on first viewing, and presumably would again for new audiences. I alternately hated and loved my film.

Because of this, I was very inclined to take on board the responses of different audiences, and in particular the producers and funders, to the different cuts of the film. But this was not particularly successful strategy:

DIARY Nov 21 2008

*Took on board funder and producer notes – you need to get to know me and family before the dreams, and from Doug, to let the audience know just how scared I was and to up the drama by showing the different stages my response went through and spelling out my fear.*

*The cut I produced in response to this was not recognisable as my film any more, and the main character (me) seemed to be making a mountain of a molehill, and you felt very sorry for her family. She seemed incredibly self-centred. I really hope I am not like that. I felt very ashamed.*

*The story seemed manipulative, and contrived, like we were trying to make a much bigger story than the events warranted. The main effect of this was to stop trusting the main character and stop trusting her journey. I liked Doug saying that the audience don't care what really happened – all they want is to be taken along on a good story. He thought I didn't need to be so literal. But actually, I think fiction and documentary are responded to differently by audiences. In documentaries, you do have to trust the veracity of what you are being told and shown. Once you call it into question you've lost the*

*pleasure. It's different to fiction, where you have suspension of disbelief at the outset. I've put it back to its (according to Doug) too understated voice over.*

There are two noteworthy points in the diary. Although I was insecure enough to rewrite the voice over and recut the entire film to satisfy the producers, I did stop when I realised that this was not the film I wanted to make, and changed everything back. This was very frustrating, both for me, the editor, and the producers and commissioning editors. Although this marked a low point in their patience with me and their belief in the film, it also marked a stage in my creative process when I realised the only person who was going to be able to solve the storytelling problems to my own criteria of the sort of film I wanted to see, was me. And it was not going to be easy. I felt everyone had a good point – the story was not emotional enough, and insufficiently spelt out in its changing stages over the year. But their suggested solutions created a film I did not want to make. I realised I needed to go direct to the audience. I knew what sort of effect I wanted the film to have, and I was prepared to prioritise direct feedback from the audience above feedback from my producers or funders.

## **Stories and Real Life**

I showed the rough cut to an audience who did not know me. Ling introduced it as the editor, and I stayed in the projection room until the end. This cut focussed on the events as they happened to me. I had gone to considerable lengths to ensure that ideas about death were deeply embodied in experience, and were not presented as information. The outcome was surprising. One woman had found the film very moving and was almost in tears as I arrived at the screen, in the flesh, and

well, and standing in front of her. 'What an amazing story, she said, so moving. But, can I ask you, was any of it based on your real life?' I was shocked and explained that the whole film was documentary, authentic; none of the sequences were faked or rehearsed. 'But it's such a story', she said. 'When I saw the kids I thought it was real' – at this point I pressed play on the tape recorder, and she continued:

**Transcript screening Filmhouse Guild Cinema Nov 2008**

**Audience:** .....and I went back to thinking it was fictional again; but you've just blown that out of the water.

**Amy:** Did anybody else think it was fiction?

**Audience:** Yes. I think the whole sequence as well was very well done. I was asking questions: am I watching reality? Is that a dead horse? Because the way you led up to it I thought was very effective. And then I thought it must be a fiction there. And there was some very profound questions about whether its fiction or reality we're watching, which led me neatly into the emotional dream. *I had been told by Lynn it was a documentary*, and after the questions started whizzing around after about five minutes, I thought, *'No, this is a very effective piece of storytelling'*.

(italics inserted)

It seemed stories are so powerful they over-ride other major considerations – like whether the events on screen really happened or not. It also seems that the audience need to know which it is that they are watching. – otherwise they spend 'five minutes with questions whizzing around their heads'! It seemed that when the audience pick up on a story they switch

into a mode where the completion of the story, the closure to the narrative, becomes an overwhelming necessity.

This audience associated documentary with facts and being given information. When they perceived it was being told as a story they repositioned their attention. Brian Boyd argues that stories shaped our brain in three ways: as a way of earning attention; as a way of understanding and recalling events, and as a route towards invention (Boyd, 2009). Together, he says, our storytelling abilities have expanded our brain's neural connections over thousands of generations and are responsible for most of our higher cognitive functions.

Lakoff and Johnson state that

Neural Mapping is not an abstract, metaphoric process. It is an observable, physical process that creates metaphoric structures and thinking in the mind. The maps are physical links: neural circuitry linking neural clusters called nodes. The domains are highly structured neural ensembles in different regions of the brain (Lakoff, Johnson 1999).

Our brain has a physical divide between left and right hemispheres. It would be fascinating to know if the brain switches from one area to another depending on whether it encounters story or information. Current brain research has not tested this, although studies by Selim Zeki amongst others have shown how specific areas are activated when looking at aesthetically pleasing objects (Zeki 2009). As the research continues, it might be possible to show that the repositioning the audience felt on moving from their expectations of documentary information, to their 'getting caught up' in a story, has a biological correlative – we already know the right brain is

activated by images, and the left by language – but perhaps stories, as carriers of image, activate parts of our right brain?

If this is the case it has implications for the way we direct, and in particular, attract audiences to our documentaries. What kind of audience response do we want after the screening of a documentary? And what characterises the different responses to a 'story' and documentary?

## **Audience Expectations**

The baseline research seems to indicate that audiences see stories and documentaries as quite different. Through Docspace, a research project on documentary exhibition, I had carried out qualitative research into documentary audiences across the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and Austria in 2006 I held focus groups to define what audiences wanted from the cinema experience, and whether documentaries could meet their expectations. Several discussions defined documentary as something burdensome: 'sometimes I think, I am not going to put myself through this experience' (Hardie 2007:17). 'When you hear the word documentary, the first thing that does come into your head is a fairly serious political, informative kind of thing.' People described wanting 'to relax when they go to a film and not to have to learn anything.' (Hardie 2007:18)

As a director whose research aim was to get the audience to go on my journey with me, I was looking for the response the audience associate with story. Following Boyd and Zeki, I could go even further, and describe my ambitions for the

audience in terms of what I wanted to activate in their brain states. Rowlands, although disparaging about how our brains came to use stories, provides a useful starting point to think about stories from a neurological perspective (Rowlands, 2010). From a non neurological point of view, I wanted them to begin by engaging the rational, problem solving elements of their brain, and, as the film continued, realise that they would not be able to comprehend or affect 'the problem' with their rational selves, and, with me, descend into their unconscious, or, archetypally, the underworld, in order to make change.

I held a further three public test screenings to around 30 to 40 people, each with slightly different audiences. This was not a scientific test, as I screened different cuts to each audience, using the screening to evolve my approach and test that the ideas were getting across. Following the audience who did not know me and were not documentary enthusiasts, I then screened to an audience that I knew personally to be interested in the subject matter. A third screening targeted the Edinburgh Film Guild members: cinema literate, but not personally known to me. After these cinema screenings, I then showed cuts to individuals and to small groups of up to six.

The dialogue produced by each screening was invaluable to my process of telling the story. In the earliest cut, the audience diverged widely about the shamanic journey. Those who were inclined to mysticism loved it, and the more sceptical found it a step too far. They switched off. As a result, I re-edited into the shamanic journey as a logical next step after meeting the main scientist, Mark Solms. I also increased the amount of scepticism expressed in the voice over at the beginning.

There was a sizable contingent in the second audience who wanted to make the link between my lungs and the land clearer. They 'got it' as an allusion and an allegory, but wanted it expanded. This was the section the producers, and the Dutch and UK commissioning editors wanted to lose. I tried very hard to persuade the funders that this link was essential to the film. To counter the argument that the traumatised images of the land arrived in the film from nowhere, I tried pointing out that this is what it had felt like, and I wanted to show exactly what happened to me and to create the sense of importance that being shown those images had for me during the shamanic journey. This could not be overstated: I felt I had saved my life by simply agreeing to 'look a little'. This argument was countered by the commissioning editors that the land story wrecked what they saw as the main story of the film – a personal journey of remembering someone who had died and to whom I had not said goodbye. Since my arguments about authenticity failed to convince them, I did a shoot in a local disused open cast coal mine, so that I could implant the idea of nature and death for the audience before the shamanic journey. They particularly disliked this scene.

I finally came up with a solution that they could, just, accept. At the very last minute (during the dub) I was able to write a voice-over that made an explicit biological connection between the earth and my body. It was, like the dream, and the beginning of the film, made up of sentences that I woke up with. I was very pleased with it, and decided I would return the television funding if I had to lose the traumatised land and old woman sequence which this developed. They allowed me to keep it in.

As the test screenings progressed, the debates within the audience became less about being confused or bored or embarrassed, and more focussed on the topics of the film, and the audience's own experiences – their own stories about death, or their dreams, or the links between human and earth, or more abstractly, about love and fear, or about family life. This gave me growing confidence in the film. The audience seemed to go deep inside themselves during the film. Often they were visibly moved. As I tautened the story, taking out more and more detail and leaving greater spaces, they were able to bring more of themselves to the journey of the film. Although I was making a film about myself and my experiences, the film was becoming a vehicle for the audience's own journey. I was watching story working.

## **Screening the Finished Film**

The producers had entered the film for its world premiere at Amsterdam International Film Festival. It was accepted, and we had a last minute rush to complete.

The International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam (IDFA) is well established and has the prestige of being the main documentary festival in Europe. Tue Steen Muller, documentary critic and teacher, then chose the film to be part of his select International Panorama in Docs Barcelona. Both festivals cater to a mix of international delegates, which include directors, producers, buyers, researchers, commissioning editors, and the local city audience.

The film had its world premiere in the 740 seat art deco Tuschinski Cinema. It had been selected for the open competition category: the first Scottish feature documentary to be given that platform. Although there had been little pre-publicity (the film was finished only days before the screening), the cinema was full, with audiences hanging over each of the two balconies. Most of the audience were from the city of Amsterdam, and most stayed for the Q & A.

Of the three screenings in Amsterdam, the first Q & A was the least interesting to me. Partly because I was nervous, and partly because the spotlight was kept on me and the audience remained in the dark, I had little sense of the audience's enquiries. I was asked questions about how I had made the film, and how I interpreted events. The images and sound design were praised, along with the intimacy and my 'bravery' in allowing myself and my family to be exposed to public gaze.

In Barcelona, the audience focussed on the link between dreams and reality, and we had a discussion from psychological, neurological, scientific, Jungian and spiritual perspectives. Tue Steen Muller said it was the most intelligent discussion he had ever heard after a film. It was a good platform to debate these approaches, and I enjoyed teasing out what conclusions could be drawn. It was clear that the audience felt they were gaining knowledge by watching the film, but also clear that our discussion was focussing on the conscious, cerebral part of this knowledge.

## **Audience Engagement**

Just as my ambition for the film was to create a lot of empty space within the narrative for the audience to fill up with their own journey, so I wanted the audience to have an active and intimate response to the film, bringing their own experiences and interpretation of the events in **The Edge of Dreaming**. Although the film was now screening at a different film festival almost every week, I remained unsatisfied with the engagement I had with the audience. At the end of a screening in Thessaloniki, I suggested we try an experiment, and a handful of us were able to rearrange schedules and held an impromptu workshop.

I wanted to work with fear, which had been such a potent reality during the main year of filming. Also in the back of my mind was an encounter in Barcelona with someone in the audience who had asked me questions about how to deal with fear. Perhaps this was a request from the audience to engage in the less cerebral, and more unconscious knowledge-sharing variously defined by Frederiksen, Renov and Bunuel. I decided to use some of the techniques I had come across in the research phase of this PhD to devise an exercise that would offer participants the chance to tell one of their own fears, and have it engaged with and retold to them from a different perspective.

The workshop in Thessaloniki seemed to go well. Participants worked in pairs and in Greek, and felt they had been able to transform a fear. They were vociferous in their praise and wanted to stay in touch with me and each other. I developed the workshop when the film played in festivals in Macedonia, Israel and Eire, until I felt deeply satisfied. The participants told me the film opened up areas in their own brain, or made

experiences possible, that they do not normally have access to. I felt I had taken 'story' to its furthest conclusion: the film's impact had been fully incorporated into the conscious and the unconscious of the audience.

## CONCLUSION

I have explored the elements of the film essay and of the documentary story in finding a way to tell both what happened to me and what I have learnt about death. It has led me to foreground story structure. This has caused me huge frustration, as ideas that I have developed have ended in the film as shadows, subtext. But it has also allowed me to interrogate how story can function. The ideas are not lost. They are digested, and turn up in the audience. The questions of documentary form have taken a long time to gestate. When I read my earliest PhD journals, they ask these questions:

Diary 2004

*Interesting how quickly the theoretically interesting research area like 'communicating the unseen' is replaced by the terrifying urgency of how can I make this work! As soon as I sit in the edit suite. Confronted by the material my anxieties at this stage are how to introduce myself, how to introduce each character, how to build engagement with the audience (through story, through visual pleasure?)*

*...How can I extend the sense of knowing and reality? What is going to get close to the experience (of death)? Which tools do I need to get there? Do I need to create new tools? Who else has set themselves similar tasks? What worked for them? There's a dialogue I have with my rushes. I want to say things, to understand things. And then there is what my rushes say to me. They're a source of knowledge. How can I make a film about the process of dying? An external and an internal process. The external is observational and that's easy. The internal? Words?*

*But I see that documentary and film work on a physical action level. I have to transform the mental journey into a physical journey.*

The research questions explored through this PhD can be seen as bringing these questions to an educated, conscious and unconscious response. The two years it took me to edit could be seen as a chronicle of my attempt to find the cinematic language and documentary structure that would give room to the audience, in this highly autobiographical film. Deepening the audience's engagement with the film by bringing in their own experiences took place in the workshops I held after the screenings. In this early journal entry is a foretaste of the question I explored about how we talk about film: a worry that verbally attractive ideas produce illusory 'truths', tidy and seductive, but in the end weaker than the simple necessity of sitting with the material. The tension between narrative and a conceptual, exploratory freedom formed the parameters of both shooting and editing throughout the practice of the PhD.

Looking back, the first years are a compendium of frustrations. Nevertheless I continued researching, digesting, allowing the material to bubble into the rest of my waking and, as it turned out, my sleeping life. The patience of my supervisors, and their willingness to watch as I discarded approach after approach, cut after cut, was invaluable. Finally, my unconscious got the message. It produced, through my dreams, a way to approach death in story. A way that could bring an audience with me on the journey.

I experienced innumerable examples of how ideas are changed by the form of film, of narrative communication through sound and image. The ideas and the information have been translated into something different. The detail is less easily apprehended cognitively. I saw how my understanding, my own growing unconscious as well as conscious 'knowledge' surfaces in the way I, and therefore the film, look at my children, and at the landscape. It is apparent in the way the sequences are cut.

The drive to the essay form came from my fascination with the sorts of information I was able to discover through making the film. This information has had a profound impact on my every day life, my sense of who I am, and through a laborious, even torturous process, on the story I have told through film.

In the end I fore-grounded story structure, even to the point where audiences confused the documentary with fiction. I did this because I wanted the audience to respond with different parts of themselves, and not just their intellect, and so have access to the sort of film experience referred to by Bunuel when he talked about the 'mystery of the image': The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, but it is almost never used to do that' (Hauke and Alister, 2001).

As I worked through the information from Mark Solms, and read more deeply into storytelling, I discovered the link between storytelling and a communication that was harder to define. I have discussed how Em responded to my film as relieving her pain. This was corroborated through the etymology of story-teller, Latin *gnarus* for knowing and story

from the welsh root 'to see'. The storyteller was someone who could suspend time for their audience, and take them into a different world. Harder then when it was oral, commonplace now, with cinema. Information from neuroscience, and in particular from Mark Solms' response to my first cut, allowed me to draw connections between knowing, reality, dreams, sense perception and finally, storytelling. This was given a deeper meaning as I read into Jung and Von Franz, who articulate an unconscious knowledge, which taps into shared archetypes that present themselves, through dreams, and fairy stories, and now cinema.

This posits an effect that the film should have on the audience. The film at present sweeps the audience up with the conventional hooks of narrative –Will I get out of the hospital? Will I die? fuelled by the mounting tension as sequence after sequence seems to make my death inevitable. That narrative is close to my lived experience of those dreams and that year, as shown in my diaries. But perhaps something else is going on. It could be that this narrative tension occupies one part of the audiences' brain while another is freed up to ponder the audience's own sense of the meaning of death. The audience reported they started thinking about their own life and death, and their own families, and began discussing loss. Some people felt they had been propelled into a meditative state. Many people wanted to watch the film immediately again. This may be evidence that the film does in some way connect them with unconscious aspects of themselves. The subject matter and filmic strategies such as seeing me so rarely probably help set up full identification for the main character and a meditative tone that encourages their introspection. The long production and self-reflective process that is a PhD by practice offered an

ideal opportunity to work through form until ideas became something denser, processed through my own unconscious, and perhaps therefore read by the audience's unconscious.

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## Selected Filmography

Fox, Jennifer	<b>Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman</b> HD digital 2007 US
Friedman, Peter; Joslin, Tom	<b>Silverlake County: the View from Here</b> digital 1993 US
Griffin, Annie	<b>Out of Reach</b> 16mm 1995 UK
Kapadia, Asif	<b>Hunstanton Beach</b> digital 2005 UK
Lanzmann, Claude	<b>Shoah</b> 16mm 1985 France
Luostrinen, Kiti	<b>The Face of Death</b> 35mm 2003 Finland
Nederhorst, M.	<b>Death on Request,</b> BBC Modern Times 16mm 1995 UK
Olin, Margarethe	<b>My Body</b> Super 8, digital, 16mm 2001 Norway
Petrov, Aleksandr	<b>My Love</b> 35mm 2006 Russia
Rosenblatt, Jay	<b>Phantom Limb</b> digital 2008 US
Wiseman Frederick	<b>Near Death</b> 16mm 1989 US
Tibbets, Sara	<b>Life After Death</b> 'Only Human' Digital 2006 UK
Varda, Agnes	<b>Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse,</b> digital 2000
Watson, Paul	<b>Malcolm and Barbara, Love's Farewell</b> BBC 2007 UK

## APPENDICES

### Appendice A

#### The Edge of Dreaming

#### Screenings overview

dec 09	IDFA /Netherlands	5 screenings
feb 2-7	Docsbarcelona/Spain	3 screenings
feb 28-mar 7	Zagrebdox/Croatia	3 screenings
mar 12-21	Thessaloniki idf/Greece	3 screenings
mar 24-28	Nicosia dff/Cyprus	3 screenings
apr 7-18	Bafici/Argentina	4 screenings
apr 23	Full Frame/US	1 screening
may 6-15	Docaviv/Israel	4 screenings
may 13-30	Edoc/Ecuador	3 screenings
jun 5-10	Make Dox/Macedonia	12 screenings
june 20	Kiev International/Ukraine	2 screenings
jun 10-13	Guth gafa ff/Ireland	2 screenings
jun 16-27	Edinburgh iff/UK	4 screenings
july 6	Supetar/Croatia	2 screenings
august 31st	Universal Hall/Forres/UK	1 screening
august 16th	San Diego/Argentina	2 screenings
sep 1-6	Kos Int FF/Greece	2 screenings
september	Dokufest/Kosovo	2 screenings
september 5 -29	GFT/Glasgow	4 screenings
september	Alchemy, UK	2 screenings
sept 18	Elles Tournant, Brussels	3 screenings
sept 22	Florida/US	3 september
sept 26- 29	Reykavik int. fest/Iceland	3 screenings
september 28	Zurich Int.fest/Switzerland	3 screenings
oct 22-nov 4	Sao Paulo Int. Fest/Brazil	3 screenings
nov 7	Inverness/UK	1 screening
nov 17	Bath/UK	1 screening
nov 6 - 15	CPH:Dox/Denmark	2 screenings
nov 23	Zinebi/Spain	2 screenings
dec 2-4	Parallel 40/Spain	40 screenings

dec	2 - 4	Parallel 40/Ecuador	8 screenings
dec	2 - 4	Parallel 40/Argentina	12 screenings
Jan	22	Dallas, US	1 screening
		Oklahoma, US	1 screening
		Tulsa, US	1 screening
		Indianapolis, US	1 screening
		Cincinnati, US	1 screening
		Des Moines, US	1 screening
		Davenport, US	1 screening
		Springfield, US	1 screening
		Urbana, US	1 screening
		Bolingbrook, US	1 screening
		Chicago, US	1 screening
		Louisville, US	1 screening
		Palatine, US	1 screening
		Kansas City, US	1 screening
		Maplewood, US	1 screening
		Columbia, US	1 screening
		Lebanon, US	1 screening
Jan	26	Peebles, Eastgate/UK	1 screening
Jan	26	Stirling/UK	1 screening
Feb	16 – 26	Rubin Museum, NY/US	10 screenings
Feb	18	Columbia (Carla Kuhn), US	1 screening
Feb	25	Stanford /US	1 screening
Feb	26	Studio, Norfolk /US	1 screening
Feb	28	Charlottesville, US	1 screening
Mar	1	DocYards, Boston/US	1 screening
Mar	3	Columbia, Chicago, US	1 screening
Mar	3	Jung Inst, Chicago, US	1 screening
Mar	5	Theo Soc, Chicago, US	1 screening
April	2	Aros, Portree, Skye, UK	1 screening
April	13	Colchester, UK	1 screening
April	16	Brighton, UK	1 screening
April	30	Reel, Beirut, Lebanon	1 screening
May	23	Nottingham Uni, UK	1 screening
July	15	Taigh Chearsabhagh, UK	1 screening

## **Audience Participation Workshops**

Mar18	Thessaloniki idf/Greece
May11	Docaviv/Israel
jun 5-10	Make Dox/Macedonia
Jun12	Guth gafa ff/Ireland
Sept 1st	Universal Hall/Forres/UK
sept 26	Reykavik int. fest/Iceland
Jan 27	Peebles, Eastgate/UK
Mar 17 – 21	Rubin Museum, New York/US
Feb	Studio of Healing Arts, Norfolk, US
Feb	Unity Church, Charlottesville, US
Feb	Jung Institute, Chicago, US
Feb	Theosophical Soc, US
April 2	Aros, Portree, Skye, UK
May 11	Reel Festival, Lebanon

## Appendix B

### Audience Engagement

In this appendix I expand on the use of the audience test screenings and workshops to explore and integrate audience responses to the final practice output. This is set out as an example of symbolic cinema's engagement with the audience.

As mentioned in the thesis, the Jesuit priest's account of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Iroquois Americans provided a model of people who felt they had a methodology to change dreams, and this happened in community:

They have no divinity but the dream. They submit themselves to it and follow its order with the utmost exactness. Whatever they see themselves doing in dreams they believe they are absolutely obliged to execute at the earliest possible moment. Iroquois would think themselves guilty of a great crime if they failed to obey a single dream.

When they had a fearful dream, they would ask people in the community to enact it with them, keeping the energy flow of the dream, but substituting a less severe outcome. For instance, if they dreamt their legs were broken after an attack, their friends would simulate the attack but only bruise their legs. Tony Crisp describes it as closely related to the unconscious:

Father Ragueneau, in 1649, described the beliefs behind their so-called superstition as follows. 'In addition to the desires which we generally have that are free, or at least voluntary in us, and which arise from a previous knowledge of some goodness that we imagine

to exist in the thing desired, the Hurons believe that our souls have other desires, which are, as it were, inborn and concealed. These, they say, come from the depths of the soul, not through any knowledge.

‘Now they believe that our soul makes these desires known by means of dreams, which are its language. Accordingly, when these desires are accomplished, it is satisfied; but, on the contrary, if it be not granted what it desires, it becomes angry ... often it revolts against the body, causing various diseases, and even death....’

The Indian tribes mentioned often had a sort of social psychiatry in which dreamers were allowed to live out their hidden (unconscious) desires that were threatening health and well being. (Crisp, Tony, 2005)

There are several parallels here of interest. The Iroquois made the *private* mental experience of a dream *public* in two ways. First they told their peers. This could be seen as creating an audience. Then they went one step further, by involving their peers (their audience) in a carefully calibrated shift of the dream, to produce a better outcome. Their peers could be described as an audience actively involved in recreating the dream.

These 17<sup>th</sup> century Iroquois enactments have been described as the beginnings of gestalt therapy. Tracy Marks explains :

The dreamwork of the Iroquois was not only an early precursor of the dreamwork and analysis of Freud and Jung; it is very similar to the approach to dream interpretation used today by many psychologists trained in Freudian, Jungian and gestalt dream techniques. (Marks, Tracy, 2010)

The role of community evokes the possible beginnings of symbolic audience engagement. In the Iroquois example of

Cornplanter's dream, the interpretation of the dream is only discovered through the involvement of the community – the 'audience' is making the meaning:

One example is that of Chief Cornplanter of the Seneca Iroquois. He had a dream that he did not quite understand, so he asked members of his community for interpretation. One such interpreter told Cornplanter that his name was now Onono and he was to give up his position as chief. Chief Cornplanter was convinced this was the correct interpretation and handed his tomahawk and wampum to a friend, thus making him chief. It is said that Cornplanter never regretted his decision, feeling it restored harmony with the Great Spirit. (Rawlinson, John, 2010)

This is a genuinely interactive creation of meaning. The protagonist takes a private mental experience and asks for an interpretation, which he then identified as valid, and acted upon. It provides a useful context to interpret the interaction with the audience invited during the test screenings which were held with different audiences during the editing of **The Edge of Dreaming**.

Niels Pagh Andersen, one of Denmark's most influential editors, describes editing the first rough cut of a documentary as the equivalent of the third draft of scripting a fiction film. It is at this stage that decisions are made over what should be put in the film, the manifest content, and also how they should be structured, which produces the latent content. By opening **The Edge of Dreaming** to audiences at a rough cut stage, I was encouraging the audience to actively participate in its meaning. Although they could have no input into its *manifest* content - an accurate account of what actually happened to me during the

year of filming - I was offering the audience a role in creating meaning of the film through its *latent* content, an interpretation of what was happening.

My involvement with audiences pushed me to go deeper into my unconscious to provide a response to the questions the audiences had asked of me. These screenings were beginning to articulate a consensus of interpretation that demanded I go beyond my own individual areas of expertise – whether of my own experience or of film-making. I was making myself available to an increasingly articulate consensus articulation that took what it needed from the film, asking me to highlight certain aspects and clarify others. As a storyteller, I was actively shaped by the audience's demands. I had been pushed by both the audience and the commissioners to clarify the meaning of certain sequences, until I was able to articulate something I had not even realized I had known. The symbolic meaning of the snake and the flying horse, and the mirroring of the brain neurons with the ice patterns, were all discovered in this way. Michelle Citron talks about autobiographical film-making as something that:

gives voice to my unconscious, allowing me to have a dialogue between that which I know, and that which I don't even know that I know. (Citron, Michelle p.281)

Working in this iterative way had created a lot of space for the audience in the editing of the film. It had also sensitized me to the different audience responses. Once the film was finally edited, I wanted to take this further, to expand on the engagement with the story from the audience. I aimed to

extend the interplay between teller and audience, described by Brian Dunnigan (Dunnigan, 2004):

The oral storyteller suspends time; in the immediacy of his presence and the improvised interplay of teller and audience the story is alive, immediate and eternal; through developing patterns of meaning and catharsis the listener is released from time and his human self.

Cinema has become the storytelling of our time. Powerful images and sound compress time through editing: sequences that could not be shown during the last 60,000 years (except in our dreams) have, for the last 100 years, been increasingly ubiquitous on our television, computer and cinema screens. The rapidity of the change is breath-taking, and it is unlikely that cinema has stopped developing as the pre-eminent 'storytelling' of our age.

However, in one aspect cinematic story telling has lost power. Cinema is not live. It's stories are no longer created by an individual in front of an audience. Cinema is pixillations projected by light, and when the end credits roll, the audience is left alone. There is no storyteller left in the room. There is no longer a person to engage with the audience's response to the film, or, perhaps even more importantly, to engage with the audiences's own experiences that have been brought to mind through the film. I wanted to return to the alive quality of interaction between storyteller and audience. Instead of cinema-going as an essentially passive and private experience, my aim was to bring back what has been lost as storytelling has become mechanized. This meant creating a space where the audience could interact with the themes of the film. This required more than a discussion or even a

sharing of the audience's personal experiences or insights into dreams or death or allegories or scientific knowledge. I wanted to bring the audience to an experiential understanding that at least gave them a hint or a taste of what I had gone through in the shamanic journey, but in the context of their own lives. By doing this, I hoped to ground the themes of the film into an experience that could be articulated and explored in a community.

### **Audience Workshops**

I designed a series of exercises for an audience workshop of around 12 people. These took place the day after the screening so that people had had some time to digest their response to the film. I asked people to work in pairs, telling each other a story of a mistake they felt they had made in their life, bringing them into judgmental left brain activity. Through various techniques the participants are then encouraged to use the right side of their brains, after a discussion of Jung's notion of archetypes and the collective unconscious. They are then helped to bring themselves from the left brain hemisphere to the right. This involves replacing verbal thinking with visual imagery, and replacing an ordered sense of "I am" with a sense of expansive connectedness.

Audience feedback has been enthusiastic, although their experiences have been diverse, reflecting the different audience groupings in different countries. The workshops have been held in Greece, Macedonia, Israel, Iceland and Eire, the UK and the US. Participants have ranged from primarily young

film auteurs (Iceland) to the entire Oncology Department of a Barcelona Hospital. One of the Spanish respondents said:

Your workshop felt very organic, and very respectful. What I mean by organic is that we moved from one thing to another freely, knowing that at the end there is a certain picture forming...The different parts are connected but there is a jump, an emotional and rational jump that the participants need to make from one to the other. And it is respectful because you propose and trust that we will make these connections, find them for ourselves in our own experience. I felt like if you took us to a room with several doors, and explained what kind of world we would find if we cross one of them, to then tell us there are shortcuts in between these worlds, jut pick a door, walk in and find them - in the end all makes a whole. (Bossi, Barcelona, 2010)

From the UK, feedback focused on the creation of community, and the liberation of using words to express private experiences.

I found the workshop profoundly moving. She enabled a group of strangers to share their experiences, to engage with their shadow, and to create a healing experience through deep listening and imaginative telling. I had no idea I was going to learn how to work with words for wellbeing, but that was my experience.

(Chrighton, UK 2010)

Also from the UK, one correspondent noted the continuation of audience involvement from the film to the workshop:

Because of the spaciousness in the film, the poetry in the images, I found myself more and more drawn into the film. There was space for me.

In an odd way I was perhaps even more aware than usual that I was watching a screen. The screen was

playing out something about me. I was drawn into a participatory role, actively witnessing and engaging with themes and issues that are both universal and deeply mine.

What was then offered felt profoundly new. Not only was there a film that had a big effect just by watching it, but by having a talk and 2hr workshop the next day, I was able to ground my engagement. I had a very profound experience in the workshop. Two days on, I am still in the midst of transformation. Some of the answers I and others in the audience found and expressed in an open forum made this experience a completely different paradigm of cinema.

(White, UK 2010)

This is an exciting idea. Could symbolic cinema, with its integral involvement of the audience, constitute a 'different paradigm of cinema?' Could it suggest a way for the classically passive audience reception to become more engaged, increasing the power and potential of cinema as an art form? What would it take to develop this from a case study of a low budget personal documentary, to a well substantiated and articulated theoretical construct ? More work, more examples, more analysis, further research.