The benefits of content analysis for filmmakers

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The Benefits of Content Analysis for Aspiring Filmmakers

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Abstract:	NOTE: This article is for the 12.3 Special Issue for FRN Our dispositions as audiences watching a particular film reveal our knowledge and experience accumulated through interactions with the everyday world and the consumption of (previous) media outputs. Thus, it can be assumed that, unless we have intersocial knowledge about a certain topic or community, these dispositions are largely formed through media outputs we have consumed. There are variety of reasons why filmmakers would benefit from being aware of audience dispositions towards the topic, stories or characters in their films. These include the potential avoidance of clichés in order to achieve originality, the purposeful use of tropes in order to target a particular audience, or the subversion of socio-cultural stereotypes. One of the most reliable strategy to achieve these three aims is to perform a content analysis of similar, existing films during a film's development stage. Content analysis reflects the mass-mediation of Western societies in which their citizens understand 'reality' through personal experience and mass media information. Any consistencies, or likewise any changes, in media content reliably reflect the social reality of the moment. This paper discusses the benefits and methodology of content analysis adapted to the context of teaching undergraduate documentary film practice. It is presented as a research tool for students that prompts them not only to bypass stock stories and characters, but also to develop a reflexive, socio-cultural awareness in relation to their own practice and the representation of people from particular communities.

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A Critical Approach to Film Practice

Beth Haller (2010, p. 27) explains that content analysis reflects the mass-mediation of Western societies "in which their citizens understand 'reality' through personal experience and mass media information". Louis Cheskin (cited in Hartley, 2003, p. 128) even argues that media content *is* reality, as our experience of it "constitutes a significant, and growing, part of our overall experience of life". Any consistencies, or likewise any changes, in media content reliably reflect the social reality of the moment; hence, apart from revealing the status quo of our culture *in* the media, content analysis also reveals the *performance of* the media (McQuail, cited in Haller, 2010, pp. 26–27). This performance does not only pertain to the mode of representation, but also to what *is* and what is *not* being represented, and how it is received.

When it comes to the production and reception of films, filmmakers and audiences alike deploy cognitive and affective mechanisms in relation to expectations, social schemas, cultural models and ideology (Persson, 2003, pp. 23–24). David Bordwell (1985, p. 32) describes these dispositions as "prior knowledge and experience" derived from our interactions with the everyday world and with other art and media outputs. Thus, it can be assumed that, unless we have intersocial knowledge about a certain topic or community, these dispositions are largely formed through media outputs we have consumed. There are variety of reasons why filmmakers and filmmaking students would benefit from being aware of audience dispositions towards the topic, stories or characters of their films. These include the potential avoidance of clichés in order to achieve originality, the purposeful use of tropes and stock stories/characters in order to predict audience responses, and the reduction of socio-cultural stereotypes. One of the most reliable strategies to achieve these three aims is a content analysis of similar, existing films during a film's development stage, the results of which can strategically and critically inform one's own film practice in terms of narrative and aesthetic methods.

This paper first lays the ground for a film practice framed by critical[1] theory, and then discusses the general role of content analysis to enable the critical conceptualisation of one's own films, whether fiction or non-fiction. After the methodology of a content analysis is heuristically adapted to the realm of film practice, I illustrate its implementation as a research tool into my teaching of documentary filmmaking to undergraduate students. Discussing the use of this methodology for filmmaking students sheds light on how it can be adopted by aspiring[2], non-academic filmmakers in general, which may encourage them to not only reconsider the use of stock stories and characters, but also to develop a theory-informed film practice that is critical, reflexive and socio-culturally aware in relation to authorship and spectatorship.

According to Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman, filmmakers frequently dismiss theory as too "ethereal, speculative, abstract or indefinite", an attitude that derives from the filmmaker's faith in the tangible and empirical nature of his/her practice (2014, p. 286). This theory refers to a critical and reflexive awareness of how hardwired and socio-cultural dispositions mobilise technical and operational skills in particular ways to produce the film artefact. Whilst academic-filmmakers (practice-led researchers or research-led practitioners) embrace such theory, filmmaking students, aspiring filmmakers and established film practitioners who have no affiliations to academic or research-led contexts tend not to. For Brian Winston this is a result of mutual resentment between practitioners and theorists (and by implication between the industry and the academy), which severely affects aspiring filmmakers to embrace any type of theoretical knowledge or rigorous research methods:

> The practitioners pour scorn on the scholars and hold their analyses to be incomprehensible irrelevances. The academy barely tolerates practitioners and thinks their more abstract musings are inadequate inanities. And the students, 'great artists' in the making, are in the middle and, all too often,

[1] The use of the term 'critical' in this paper primarily relates to the theoretical framing of film practice in relation to representation. It does not explicitly refer to 'critical theory' as a school of thought, though it is loosely related to its tenets. For a detailed discourse on (documentary) film practice and critical theory, see Wayne (1997, 2008).

[2] Established filmmakers have the benefit of a large repository of films they have watched. This repository is tacitly consulted when they conceptualise their films, an intuitive process that resembles the basic principles of a content analysis.

> hostile to traditional academic demands and concerns. (Winston, 2012, p. 196)

Content analysis involves the empirical study and the subsequent theoretical analysis of a body of film texts in order to generate knowledge about, for example, production practices, representation or common formal denominators. However, rather than a tool for *analysis*, I propose its usage as a tool for *synthesis*, whereby the study produces data and knowledge that can be directly embedded in one's own film text. This approach does not regard film practice unilaterally as the filmmaker's realm, but also as part of spectatorship. Patrick Fuery stresses the inextricable connection between filmmaking practice and viewing practice by arguing that the audience and the filmmaker approach the film artefact with "interpretations, knowledges, experiences and modes of comparison" (2012, p. 85). Carl Plantinga (2011, p. 30) calls this the 'filmmaker-audience loop', which describes the shared assumptions filmmakers and spectators hold about human psychology and behaviour – assumptions that, on the one hand, enable an audience to understand conventional narratives, and on the other, enable filmmakers to intuitively predict audience response. In this sense, theory generated from content analysis can account for filmmaking and spectatorship practices in relation to the actual film text, but also to its *con*text, thus exposing practices of representation, which is understood as the cultural act of producing meaning (or experience) for a receiver through a particular language (Hall, 1997, p. 15).

Thus, from an audience reception perspective, content analysis sheds light on filmmaking practices that resonate with audiences or potentially lead to stereotypical or clichéd representations, the knowledge of which can help prevent these by gauging the spectator's response to the final film artefact in relation to the preconceptions he/she has acquired through viewing a body of previous films. This approach adheres to Wayne's (1997, p. 11) assertion that a critical framing of film practice enables the practitioner to place his/her work in relation to other cultural artefacts and hence discern connections with or departures from certain traditions of representation. Further, it illuminates the effects of textual strategies on the audience and provides the practitioner with a vocabulary that enables the understanding and communication of complex ideas through filmic form, the reflexive interrogation of the implicit assumptions underpinning formal conventions, and the conception of potential alternatives (pp. 11–12).

Content Analysis in Film Practice: A Methodology

Clive Seale and Fran Tonkiss (2012, p. 460) explain that content analysis generally involves the quantitative examination of a sample (e.g. media texts) in terms of the presence and frequency of specific terms, narratives or concepts. The general stages involve sampling (choosing media texts), coding (textual analysis for common denominators) and interpretation (drawing conclusions in relation to the research scope). The sampling should be carried out according to three criteria: manageability, relevance and representativeness (p. 461).

In terms of manageability, embarking on an empirically rigorous, quantitative and large-scale content analysis would inhibit the pragmatic nature of film practice and exceed the research knowledge required, as well as the scholarly knowledge generated. Thus, it is more expedient to take a qualitative approach that precludes quantitative coding and limits the research to small, manageable samples. This enables the researcher to understand the production and interpretation of meaning in media texts, and to draw conclusions about wider social and cultural practices (Haller, 2010, pp. 34–35). The extreme specificity of such an anecdotal method, as Sean Cubitt (2013, p. 6) claims, "provides depth and colour to the generalist findings of methods that deal with multiple instances and large-scale tendencies", and grounds more abstract formations, such as representations, in a specific instance.

In terms of relevance, the task is to decide on what basis the film texts are chosen with regards to the presence of certain concepts, which depends on the objective the content analysis has in relation to informing one's film practice. For instance, the filmmaker may want to research the historical use of a certain trope and bring his/her own work in relation to the historicity of that trope. A case in point is Quentin Tarantino who, based on his wide viewing repository of fiction films and his understanding of spectatorship, intuitively understands how to recycle narrative tropes by simultaneously replicating and mutating them, thus performing an act of homage, innovation, reminiscence and authorship at the same time. On the other hand, Abbas Kiarostami's films that feature main female characters, such as *Ten* (2002) and *Shirin* (2008), break not only stereotypical representations of gender roles commonly found in

mainstream Iranian films, but, by implication, also break universal narrative conventions, both of which have propelled Kiarostami to international acclaim.

In terms of the representativeness of the sample, the key consideration is the target audience. The chosen film texts need to represent the same constituency of spectators as for the practitioner's own work, which is the most efficient tactic to ultimately devise filmic strategies that either resonate with or challenge particular audience dispositions. This constituency can be heuristically described by means of three criteria: audience type, period and socio-cultural context. Although the exact deployment of these three criteria depends on the case study at hand, it is possible to set some loose demarcations.

Keith Sawyer (2006, p. 127) offers a simple yet pragmatic audience type model that, to filmmaking students, is more pragmatic than the rigorous audience segmenting found in marketing and advertising. He distinguishes between three groups of spectators: 'connoisseurs', 'amateurs' and the 'public'. Although his model is used within a discourse of creative authorship, his three audience groups can be adapted to the content analysis sampling of film texts with regards to their knowledge of the relevant concepts mentioned above. Connoisseurs know most about the concept in question; they are creatively and intellectually more active and more critical (p. 127). This usually includes professionals that work in a critical context surrounding the medium (e.g. film scholars) or the concept itself (e.g. in the case of racial stereotypes, a social activist). In addition, when it comes to the representation of certain demographics, connoisseurs have first-hand knowledge of communities. Thus, because of a more direct intersocial engagement, as well as a more critical and reflexive frame of mind, their dispositions are probably not tacitly formed by stereotypical film representations. Connoisseurs are usually the target audience for films with references that build on specific pre-existing knowledge. For example, a film scholar would be the primary spectator for film (or audiovisual) essays, which usually present a scholarly argument through audio-visual means.

On the other hand, amateurs, according to Sawyer, have been exposed to some experience of the concept and the medium, but not in a professional context (p. 129), which is why they may lack the extent of the critical context a connoisseur would bring to the film. For example somebody working for a disability charity would have first-hand experience of disabled people and disability issues, which is why they would be the target audience for activist, corporate

or fundraising films highlighting disability issues. Of course, familiarity of a topic or real-life people does not by default entail critical awareness of clichés or stereotypes. A disability charity worker or even disabled person can be as prone to stereotypical dispositions as somebody who has only experienced disability through media. This is very difficult to verify without a dedicated audience research study involving focus groups, which would go far beyond the scope of film practice. Thus, the boundary between connoisseurs and amateurs is porous, but if the target audience is the general public (the third type), the boundary between that group and the previous two is altogether more clear-cut.

As Sawyer explains, a public audience operates collectively and represents the majority of spectators (p. 130). The public is familiar with the concept in question only through mediated content (not first-hand experience) that lacks a critical framework, which is why they are not familiar with (and not interested in) relevant critical or theoretical discourses. For this reason, when it comes to representation, this group is very prone to the implicit consumption of social stereotypes, since they are embedded in their dispositions. From this perspective, filmmakers who tacitly follow filmmaking formulas without supplementing them with critical theory also fall into this group, especially if these formulas entail stereotyping. After all, mere knowledge of the medium's language is no guarantor for a critical approach. A public audience also represents the target audience of mainstream films. The term 'mainstream' denotes the common reception of films based on the predominant narrative and aesthetic conventions. As such, it refers to the reception of normative film texts that results in largely homogenous audience receptions, based on the previously mentioned filmmaker-audience loop, which explains similarities in dispositions between filmmakers and public spectators. This is unlike the heterogeneous reception and production found in niche (e.g. experimental) domains, which, compared with a public audience, represent minorities that may well fall into the connoisseur or amateur category.

The public audience is an important criterion for the sampling when the filmmaker aims to instrumentalise, subvert of reconfigure social stereotypes of particular communities. After all, stereotypes operate within the mainstream, which is why they have to be studied and addressed in the same realm. For instance, if a practitioner targets a public audience, it would be inaccurate to evaluate their dispositions based on film samples that have not been widely distributed and publicly exhibited. All in all, the film practitioner needs to sample the films

according to similar exhibition platforms his/her own film is aiming for. Hence, especially for filmmaking students, a content analysis is an important exercise to encourage them to consider the target audience and relating exhibition and distribution strategies in the development stage of their film practice.

The period of the sampled films is also determined by the exposure to the target audience. If a particular age segment plays an important role in the choice of target audience, this criterion needs to be addressed accordingly. If not, a global, contemporary audience may be demarcated by a suitable time frame. Naturally, this needs to take into account the possibility of films that may have been made outside that time frame, but may still inform audience dispositions. This can be the case with connoisseur and amateur audiences, but also public audiences who are familiar with certain "classics" or cult films. The period also needs to take into account the historicity of conventions, some of which are in constant flux, whilst others are in perpetual stagnation.

The socio-cultural context of film samples is not only determined by the audience type but also the context of exhibition. The trans-national nature of most contemporary films (especially due to the ease of online exhibition and distribution) makes this criterion very difficult to assess for the sampling. At the same time, because of globalisation, when a Western public audience is targeted, one may pinpoint mainstream films that have been screened at major film festivals, have had wide theatrical release, have been broadcast on mainstream channels, or are available on popular VOD platforms in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. This represents a gross generalisation, but at least it offers a conscious approximation of a cultural context.

When it comes to the actual coding of film texts through textual analysis and the identification of common denominators, Richard Dyer's (2006) methodology is useful. Although used in a context of identifying hegemonic stereotypes, it can be applied to pinpointing a variety of other concepts. Implicitly referencing the Russian formalist model of of fabula and syuzhet, Dyer distinguishes between two textual dimensions: the 'structural' (or 'narrative'), which includes the material and ideological organisation of the world depicted, as well as the actual plot (p. 358); and the 'iconographic' (or 'aesthetic') dimension, which includes visual and aural signs present in the cinematography, sound and editing (p. 357).

The final stage of a content analysis, the interpretation, represents the link between the coded data and the conceptualising strategies for one's own film. As both, the sampling and the coding are carried out in an anecdotal and heuristic manner, the interpretation can be substantiated through a mechanism of critical and theoretical framing from relevant academic fields, which can provide insights into larger social or cultural issues (Seale and Tonkiss, 2012, p. 465).

Case Study: Content Analysis for Undergraduate Students

Content analysis has been an integral part of my research-led documentary practice and the representation of disability [redacted], but the challenge has been to adopt this methodology into the pedagogical context of teaching film production modules (fiction and documentary) on the undergraduate courses BA Film (University of South Wales) and BA Film Production (University of West London). The key strategy to convey not only the importance but the actual methodology of content analysis was to dilute the theory to a level where the pragmatism of filmmaking, rather than academic rigour, is foregrounded. Figure 1 shows the seminar slide that introduced content analysis to year-1 students. The main aims are to identify clichés, (social) stereotypes and inspirations.

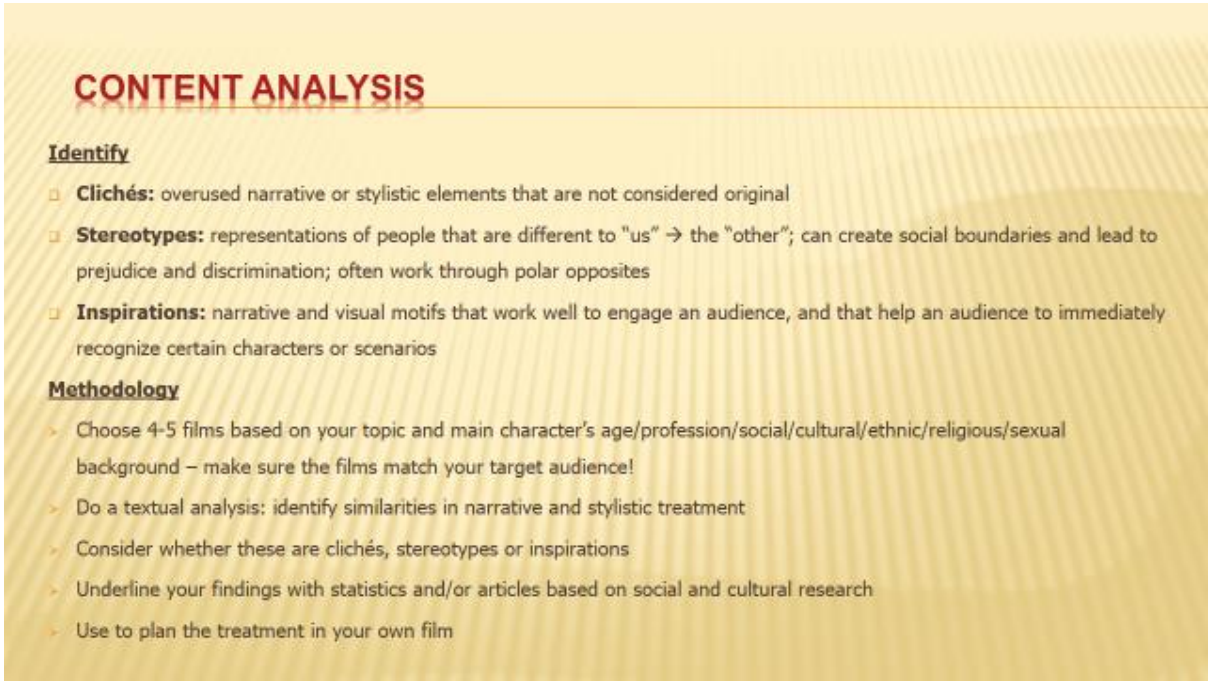

Figure 1

In terms of clichés and stereotypes, students usually respond very positively to strategies that aim to reduce 'othering' stereotypes and foster originality in their own films, especially if they understand that this may not just be an ethical endeavour, but also a tactic to impress film festival selectors, commissioning editors, producers, clients and peers. I also emphasise to them the benefits of identifying inspirations from other films, which in many cases alleviates the anxieties of first-year students about not knowing how to start their project in terms of narrative and aesthetic treatment. In terms of fiction, this provides students with concrete ideas for the screenplay and storyboard, and in terms of documentary, they gain the necessary knowledge to produce a concrete proposal and research agenda for their fieldwork.

The simplified methodology for carrying out the content analysis contains most aspects discussed earlier. Its concrete application to the students' own project is later monitored in tutorials and in-class presentations, and tutor and peer feedback helps refine the sampling, coding (textual analysis) and interpretation process. Students are also prompted to use findings from social or cultural research to theoretically substantiate their conclusions, in order to somewhat compensate for the lack of rigour in sampling. However, since this methodology is taught on film practice (not theory) modules, they are not expected to do rigorous academic research in this area, and non-academic sources are permitted.

After introducing the methodology, the content analysis is illustrated through examples that address the students' own dispositions in terms of matching and subverting their expectations (figure 2). For instance, for documentary production I use the concept of representing young African women to a public, Western audience. This resonates with the demographics of the student cohort that, whilst being predominantly Western, also has a high proportion of young black women with African heritage, living in the UK. The first example, *The Cut*, features the issue of FGM (female genital mutilation). When asked, students immediately respond to the stereotypes of representing these women as young mothers, living in rural villages, being dominated by men and being subjected to archaic traditions.

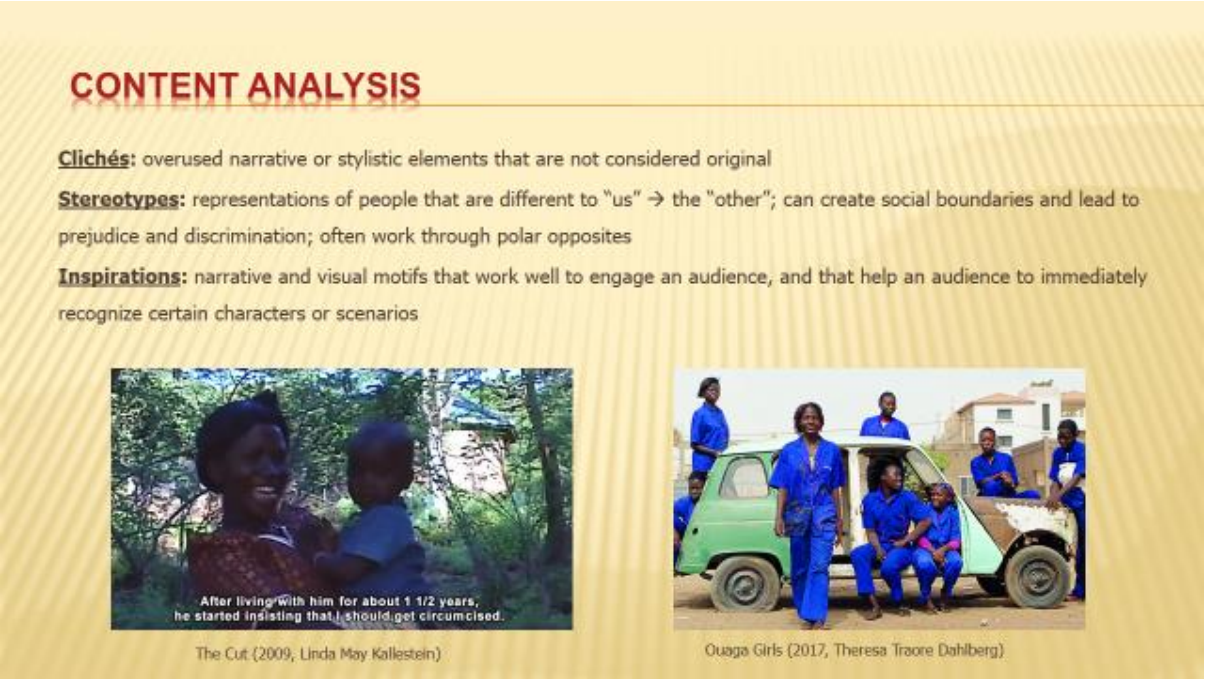

Figure 2

There is no need to show more samples, since I explain to students that this is a representative example, and students (usually) pick up on the stereotypes, which indicates that they have experienced these types of representations of African women in Western mainstream media before. The counter example is *Ouga Girls*, a documentary that depicts a group of women in Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou, attending a school for car mechanics. By experiencing the binary opposites in representation, students realise that unlike to *The Cut*, *Ouaga Girls* breaks traditional and culture-specific gender roles. The female characters operate within typical male professions, they are empowered agents of their own lives, they freely pursue their career aspirations and leisure activities within a modern, urban environment, and they confidently use technology around them. By juxtaposing these opposite film examples, students become also aware of formal and stylistic elements that are indeed ideological in nature. For instance, *The Cut* features the Western director's voice-over narration as a narrative glue of the interviews with the women, which are specifically focused on hardship and subjugation. From a post-colonial perspective, this Westernised mediator that singles out negative aspects of their lives and refuses to provide a significant voice to the 'other' is problematic. On the other hand, *Ouaga Girls* uses an observational style through which the audience directly engages with the screen characters. In addition, the narrative focuses on a

multitude of positive, negative and ambiguous aspects of the women's lives, creating a more nuanced character portrait. Of course, it is important to explain to students that social stereotypes do not constitute misrepresentations per se, but they emerge if outgroup representations are frequent, homogenous and simplistic, rather than occasional, heterogeneous and multi-layered.

Nevertheless, the step from learning and understanding a methodology, to actually and successfully applying it is not straightforward. For instance, only about 70% of students apply the content analysis to their practice, and only about 50% do so successfully (i.e. in the critical way intended). However, one reason for this is that, currently, the content analysis is only one aspect of a larger research presentation and preproduction folder, and time constraints also reduce the scope of using it. In future, this could be compensated by having the content analysis as a stand-alone assessed exercise, such as a mini presentation to peers or a blog task on their regular research blog, which forms part of their individual assessment.

Still, there have been several exemplary applications in the past. For instance, one group of students wanted to make a documentary about children and technology. Outlining their analysis as part of a research presentation[3], their samples were limited to only two (figure 3), targeting a Western public audience, but their coding revealed some very interesting common denominators in clichés and stereotypes (figure 4), but also stylistic inspirations, such as using reaction shots of the children when interacting with technology, as well as close-ups of technological devices in order attach narrative significance to them (figure 3). The students also framed the content analysis with a multitude of research and writings based on social sciences and cultural studies, such as an empirical study that indicates that media may be premature to demonise technology used by children (figure 5). The resulting documentary they made, *A Day in the Life of Shasmeen*, is – unlike the two film samples from the content analysis – a nuanced and multi-layered character portrait from the child's (not the parents') perspective, which avoids painting a black-and-white picture of the impact of technology on young children (figure 6).

[3] All slides shown here are from the original student presentations, but they have been slightly tweaked in terms of grammar, spelling, expression and formatting in order to efficiently convey the ideas (given that there is no chance for clarifying feedback from the students to the reader, as I had in the seminars).

Including parents

Close-Up shots of technology being used

Child reactions

Screenagers is a documentary film that explores parental struggles over social media, video games, and internet addiction and offers solutions to help kids find balance

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGxp83i5L1c

Figure 3

CLICHÉS AND STEREOTYPES

- Represents children in the same way without considering individual personalities
- Parents' point of view is more important (interviews, screen time)
- Focuses on their reactions in different situations, not them being active
- Technology is shown in a negative light
- Not observational - stylised

Figure 4

The Technologisation of Childhood? Young Children and Technology in the Home

Plowman L, McPake J & Stephen C (2010)

https://www.stir.ac.uk/research/hub/publication/1094

- We describe an 18-month empirical investigation of three- and four-year-old children's uses of technology at home, based on a survey of 346 families and 24 case studies.
- The findings are reported in the context of social commentators' anxieties about the ways in which childhood is being transformed by technology.
- Although we report evidence of some parental disquiet about the role of technology in children's lives, we illustrate some of the complexities in families' attitudes to, and uses of, technology and conclude that it is not perceived by parents to be the threat to modern childhood that is claimed.

Figure 5

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THEMES

- "A Day in the Life of Shasmeen"
- Narrative:
  - Following the **everyday live** of the character and how technology is included
  - Demonstrate the fact that **technology usage is high for children**, so **moderation in families is good** but technology is also **useful** to them
  - **Create a debate** – good or bad? Has it replaced physical toys and games? Is it necessary? Is it educational? (use the point of view of characters to construct these answers)
- Themes:
  - Relationship to parents
  - Everyday life
  - Education
  - Child Development
  - Leisure activities

Shasmeen

Figure 6

Another example is a documentary about Jamal, a young boxer. Initially, this student group wanted to focus on the boxing as the main narrative drive, using aesthetic strategies to film the training in a poetic and highly stylised manner. However, after their content analysis (figure 7), which included mostly fiction films (their rationale was that to a public audience boxers are mainly known through fiction films), they concluded that it would make a more nuanced and original film to include biographical dimensions other than boxing, especially in relation to intellectual and non-sports related activities. Thus, their film resulted in an intimate character portrait about Jamal, which juxtaposes boxing and running a clothes business as being two professional aspirations of the same character.

Figure 7

Conclusion

In summary, a content analysis offers an efficient strategy for gauging the spectator's and the filmmaker's own dispositions, including the tendency towards stereotyping, as well as encouraging the filmmaker to consider alternative narrative and aesthetic forms of expression and representation. However, it can also provide points of reference for how

certain topics can engage spectators, and what pre-existing knowledge can be built upon. Of course, I do not advocate for a content analysis to be the standard procedure for established filmmakers, but it proves valuable in a pedagogical context in order to raise students' awareness towards a critical approach to filmmaking in terms of the audience and their own socio-cultural dispositions.

On a meta-theoretical level, the adaptation of content analysis to the development stage of film practice embodies John Brockman's (2010) idea of "the third culture". This refers to Charles Percy Snow's (1993) concept of "the two cultures", in which Western society is split into the sciences and the humanities. For Snow this constitutes a major hindrance to pragmatically solving local and global problems, and Brockman's third culture represents the mediating agent between the sciences and the humanities. In a landscape where interdisciplinarity and bricolage is progressively practised in order to build bridges between disciplines, between theory and practice, and between the industry and the academy, the link between social science methods (such as content analysis) and film practice within a humanities context yields a range of practical and theoretical opportunities.

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