Dispatch

The Funeral Director and His Film

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For several years I was obsessed with the corporate takeover of the North American funeral industry. I'd encountered mortality studies during my BA in Anthropology, and continued this work into my MA. It began with a basic interest in the relationship between funeral director and client. But then I met Tom Crean, a funeral director in Vancouver. He became the subject of my thesis, as well as a 20-minute documentary film I made as a companion piece.

Tom is a third-generation, independent funeral director in Vancouver, BC. He was in his last term at UBC studying for a philosophy degree when he received a fateful phone call. It was 1975 and his uncle, the owner of the family funeral business, had died suddenly of a heart attack. His mother called him up and told him that if he didn't take over the business she would sell it. Tom quit school the next day and has never looked back.

Tom is a man who draws you in. He can be caring, professional, sympathetic, and has a deep, authoritative voice. He's also an experienced activist and community organizer, full of fire and passion. I first approached his funeral home to ask if I could do some ethnographic fieldwork within its walls. By the end of my first meeting with him, I had been recruited. Tom wasn't interested in my academic theorizing. I told him I was also a filmmaker, and so he decided that we would make a film together. He wanted me to help fight back against the corporate takeover of the funeral industry, which he'd been resisting for years. This was a matter of social justice, he told me, not academic requirements. And the power of film would be our medium.

The film was eventually titled *Tom Quixote*. It was as much a biopic of Tom and his fascinating history as it was about the rise of corporate "deathcare" and the movement to fight its encroachment into the industry. Tom was engaged in legal battles with Service Corporation International (SCI), the world's largest provider of deathcare services. Under the moniker of "Dignity Memorial," SCI has acquired thousands of previously

independent funeral homes in North America. Tom related to me how SCI has attempted to run him out of business, using a variety of tactics such as cutting off his supply sources. He'd also weathered attacks from the Loewen Group, another deathcare corporation that attempted to buy him out, which in turn went bankrupt and was absorbed by SCI.

He told me all of this, and I was hooked. My project became a social justice-driven filmmaking collaboration. It had started as an ethnography of a funeral home, guided by experimental ethnographic methods which recognize the fundamentally performative (Castañeda, 2006; Culhane, 2011) and improvisational (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007) nature of ethnography. The project was also meant to explore the nature of methodology. This was to be done by keeping the project as open-ended as possible, attempting to allow for it to follow an iterative path. And in fact it did.

But there was tension from the beginning. I was a relatively inexperienced filmmaker at the time. Tom was experienced with mainstream media (e.g., Ward, 2009; White, 2008; Johnson, 2002), but had never worked with someone like me, a student trying to gain a credential while helping with his campaign. Thus, the beginning of our relationship was marked by an ambiguous power dynamic. It climaxed in a tense moment – a disagreement over aesthetic vision – during the final phases of producing the film. It is from this disagreement that I eventually understood, at a more visceral level, the challenges of using visual methods in the pursuit of social justice. Filmmaking requires certain things – story arcs, character development, emotional resonance – that activism doesn't always handily provide.

George Marcus, in his proposal to revitalize the notion of "complicity" in ethnography, has written about taking positions. One can do this by engaging not its usual meaning of "partnership in an evil action," but instead the "state of being complex or involved" (1998, p. 105). He refers to the need for a "multi-sited imaginary," a strategy of constructing the field of study from an assemblage of sites, any of which may demand a particular allegiance, or "circumstantial activism," from the ethnographer (Marcus, 1998, p. 6). These different allegiances, exacted "to greater or lesser extents" at each site (Reddy, 2009, p. 96), necessarily transform the ethnographer into an activist, in the sense of developing a dedication to a particular person in the field, namely the participant(s) of one's study.

In my case, I became an activist both in the more intangible sense of my dedication to Tom as the sole participant of my ethnographic study (and my film), as well as in the more concrete sense of helping him spread the word about the undertakings of corporate deathcare. As Marcus also notes, this kind of complicity runs both ways:

> What complicity stands for as a central figure of fieldwork within this multi-sited context of research…is an affinity, marking equivalence, between fieldworker and informant. This affinity arises from their mutual curiosity and anxiety about their relationship to a 'third' – not so much the abstract contextualizing world system

but the specific sites elsewhere that affect their interactions and make them complicit (in relation to the influence of that 'third') in creating the bond that makes their fieldwork relationship effective. (Marcus, 1998, p. 122)

I quickly became complicit in the making of the film with Tom. I established this bond with him and felt with it an obligation to him, one that by the end of the project I struggled to fulfill.

Upon my first visit to Tom's house, I noticed in his living room a full suit of armour and various axes and swords bracketed on the wall behind. They came from Toledo, Tom said. He had bought two sets on vacation in the 70's, had them shipped back to Vancouver and sold one to a museum. He loved the tale of Don Quixote. We ended up using the helmet and sword as props for a press photo for the film.

I was at Tom's house so we could begin writing a script for the film. Tom's time was precious, and I spent a large portion of the project simply waiting for correspondence and meeting times. We felt scripting his lines would be the best way forward, despite the fact that we were making a documentary. That way he could say exactly what he wanted to, and the day of the shoot for the interview, as well as the editing, would go more quickly. At the time, he had been looking for a publisher for his memoir. He gave me a copy of his manuscript, which I then used to build the script for *Tom Quixote*. Tom would perform it, as if it were an interview.

Performance in documentary film is, as Thomas Waugh writes, "the self-expression of documentary subjects for the camera in collaboration with [the] filmmaker/director" (1990, p. 71). Waugh traces a long tradition of documentary performers acting "in much the same way as their dramatic counterparts" (1990, p. 67), despite the expectation that documentary film "implies the absence of elements of performance, acting, staging, directing, etc." (1990, p. 66). It was taken for granted in the early days of documentary that the people cast in the film would be acting – acting in the sense of "playing themselves and their social roles before the camera" (1990, p. 67).

Tom acted out the role of himself, as funeral director/activist. Yet, this version of himself was not entirely artificial. Tom assumed a voice and character that he had used many times before when speaking as a funeral director. Scripting interviews is a method I've since used on almost every documentary film I've made. It's both expedient and ensures that the film's message has a better chance of coming across more clearly. Social issue documentaries can become run-away trains if not controlled. Participants and events in an unfolding activist struggle rarely conform to scripts, and so it sometimes becomes necessary to constrain them in certain ways. Although I appreciate the integrity of observational documentaries, it's also important to recognize that objectivity is an illusion, and in the case of *Tom Quixote*, we were more interested in producing a film that clearly portrayed our message than one that was ostensibly more true to the perceived rules of the genre. It ultimately became a question of balancing artistic and activist interests.

As Williams writes: "Documentary is not fiction and should not be conflated with it. But documentary can and should use all the strategies of fictional construction to get at truths" (1993, p. 20). She further writes that while truths are "not guaranteed," they "nevertheless matter as the narratives by which we live" (Williams, 1993, p. 14). Writing a script ahead of time, drawing on this fictional strategy, in order to make the film look spontaneous and "truthful," was how Tom and I thought it would have the most impact. We recognized that while we were only telling Tom's side of the story – both of us were sceptical about the chance of getting an interview with anyone from SCI – the particular and very constructed truths we were presenting might still resonate with the audience in ways we might not even imagine. We were hoping to draw the viewer in, to have the film "demand the viewer bear the weight of knowing responsibility" (Nunn, 2004, p. 421) for what Tom was telling them. We hoped to convince the audience to engage with the film as a truth, relevant to their own lives. As Renov writes, "how else to persuade viewers to invest belief, to produce "visible evidence," and even induce social action?" (2004, p. xvii).

One of the commitments I made to Tom was to show him the finished film before it was released. This is an obligation I've since fulfilled with all my documentary subjects, as a basic part of our collaboration, yet there is tension and danger in this approach. What if the subject doesn't like the film? What if they demand changes? How does a filmmaker reconcile artistic vision with the foundation of complicity? This is the point at which the relationship between filmmaker and subject can become particularly muddy, and this is exactly what happened with *Tom Quixote*.

Once I'd finished the edit, I dropped off a DVD copy of the first cut at Tom's funeral home. It took Tom several days to get around to watching it, as he picked it up and immediately left town for a conference. The days spent waiting were nerve-wracking. And when he finally had the chance to watch it, my anxieties were confirmed. He came back and asked for changes. One was to the credits, and these changes were not entirely finished until several weeks later, after much negotiation. Tom, referring to his years of campaigning, wrote to me in an email: "A ton of people have helped me do all of this but I have cut the list down to just the folks who were essential." Despite this, the list was very long, and wasn't just a list of names. It included a significant amount of text that explained who the people were and for what they were being thanked; the text was just as long, if not longer, than the list of people. Such a change would have added at least a couple of minutes to the film's run time, not a small matter considering, for example, some film festivals charge higher submission fees for entries over twenty minutes, and the longer a short film is the less likely it is to be programmed. Not to mention that the people themselves weren't involved in the making of the actual film. I sent an email back to Tom saying:

> Hi Tom, this is good stuff, but it's too much. This is far beyond any realistic expectations for the film. This strikes me as something more suited for your book, for instance. It's not the kind of material that translates well into film - there's too much of it and it's too intricate...too much history behind it that needs explication…If anything, this kind of stuff would work as part of any written followups or accompaniments to the film (or as part of your own press for the film), rather than be in the film itself.

Ultimately, we compromised: I edited in all the names in alphabetical order, without any of the extra explanatory text. In hindsight, this rings as a trivial matter and not something to become overly concerned about; but as a grad student racked with anxiety about embarking on my first major ethnographic research project, paralyzed by my positioning and authority, it was stressful.

There was one request Tom made, however, that was significant. Although the film mentions other people involved in Tom's efforts, it is really about Tom himself. This decision was both pragmatic and stylistic. As MacDougall (2006, p. 272) has noted, film has an affinity for exploring individual agency and identity, and I felt Tom's personality was strong enough to carry the whole film. Character studies are attractive, especially in activist film. Watching an individual work through challenges and succeed is very powerful, and I wanted this for *Tom Quixote*.

Yet there was an opportunity to include others in the film. Tom asked at one point if it would be possible to include interview footage of priests, who would further testify to the gravity of the situation. He wrote in an email, "in a court of law, having a witness is only everything!" Tom wanted to include these extra talking heads as expert commentary, to ensure his message came across. My reluctance to do so came from reading about the American filmmaker Errol Morris, who has said:

> The traditional idea of how documentaries are to be put together is that you talk to some twenty people and you inter-cut the interviews. "A" says such-and-such, and then "B" contradicts "A" and then "C" says something else altogether. Supposedly you gain perspective on an issue by listening to this interplay of characters, in effect, arguing with each other. Well, what if you tried something completely different? What if you created a movie about one character's perception of history, about one character's attempt to understand himself through history? (Bloom, 2010, p. 111)

When only one person is presented in the film, only one voice and one version of history, "the interviewee [becomes the] primary guarantor of experience and knowledge" (Nunn, 2004, p. 418). This is what I had wanted to do with *Tom Quixote* since the plan changed from making an observational film to one based on Tom's story.

However, I was afraid that this disagreement would blow up much larger than it started, and would cause the project to grind to a halt. What if Tom

refused to continue working with me? What if he told me he did not want the film to go ahead if the extra interviews were not put in? We had previously agreed to work at this project as best we could, with limited experience and resources on both our parts. We had established in our first meeting that his participation was voluntary, and that he could leave the project whenever he wanted. What if, because of this disagreement, this was that moment? Tom felt very passionate about having the support of the clergy, with whom he works every day. He told me he spent many years building up relationships with them, in a time when they often feel threatened by secular funeral services.

In the end, I tried to assert my authority as the filmmaker. I responded to his concerns by emphasizing the value of the singular voice in the film. I pushed back, and was afraid I was breaking my obligation to him. Tom had sent the email saying "having a witness is only everything!" He then capitulated, and wrote: "But I defer to your more informed judgement." And in an email sent later the same day, he had apparently moved on from the issue altogether to the matter of bringing his guitar to the interview shoot, so that I could record him singing a song (specifically, "The Undertaker Blues," which plays during the film's credits).

Kazubowski-Houston experienced a similar situation during her work in Poland, on the production of a play exploring violence in the lives of Roma women. The actors and the Roma women with whom she worked expressed differing opinions about how the play they were producing should be put on and what the content should include. The Roma women wanted the play to have the feel of a soap opera – "characterized by an emphasis on the melodramatic and the use of realism and cultural verisimilitude" – whereas the actors wished to put on a more *avant-garde* production, clinging to a more "abstract, non-realist, metaphoric" artistic vision (2011, p. 234-235). Kazubowski-Houston herself did not favour the Roma women's ideas, because she was afraid they would not adequately represent the reality of violence in their lives, and so ended up convincing them of the need to create a production based more on the actors' visions, much as I ended up convincing Tom that the interviews with priests would not work in the film.

This was because my aesthetic tastes differed from Tom – as Bourdieu has indicated, a case of "instituting and authorizing one's own aesthetic tastes over those of others" (Kazubowski-Houston, 2011, p. 237). I assumed I knew what was best for the film, and how Tom's message was to be put out, and was concerned with building my reputation as a filmmaker. As Kazubowski-Houston wrote of her experience: "…it would be misleading of me to deny that the artist in me was also, to some extent, concerned about creating a theatrically compelling event that would validate the actors' and my reputations as theatre artists" (2011, p. 236). Creating the film was about becoming a "juggler of power" (2011, p. 236), negotiating and compromising personal visions. Some editing decisions in *Tom Quixote* were made in favour

of my personal motivations, at the expense of Tom's vision, whereas at other times Tom's ideas were implemented.

Kazubowski-Houston writes of the "inconsistent nature of fieldwork" to describe the differing motivations she encountered, how they clashed and how this resulted in her asserting her authority over the final product (2011, p. 239). She had to negotiate competing demands. The Roma women wanted one thing, the actors much the opposite. I had to do something similar. I think there was somewhat of a contradiction in Tom's expectations of my role. On the one hand, he had agreed to work with me because I had the technology and experience to make a film about him and his story – he recognized my role as the filmmaker, and deferred to my judgement. On the other hand, he also had an articulate vision of what should be done, and how it should play out, and so sometimes viewed me simply as a "resource person, technician or facilitator" who was working to craft his vision (Waugh, 1990, p. 83). The moments during which I ended up asserting my authority were partly a result of the clash between these two expectations. I had to try to juggle all of this, and ultimately some balls were dropped in order to keep others in the air.

What this relationship is ultimately about is the "problem of representation," which is found "in the power dynamics between any filmmaker and her subjects" (Elder, 1995, p. 96). As Marcus writes:

> The inequality of power relations, weighted in favor of the anthropologist, can no longer be presumed in this world of multi-sited ethnography. The fieldworker often deals with subjects who share his own broadly middle-class identity and fears, in which case unspoken power issues in the relationship become far more ambiguous than they would have been in past anthropologist research; alternatively, he may deal with persons in much stronger power and class positions than his own, in which case both the terms and limits of the ethnographic engagement are managed principally by them. (1998, p. 121)

This quotation would work equally well if I replaced "anthropologist" and "fieldworker" with "documentary filmmaker." There were various moments during the making of the film when Tom demonstrated his power, just as there were moments when I did. Our relationship was a tug-of-war. For Elder, the ideal collaboration is one whereby "accountability is formally built into the filming relationship, where basically a filmmaker cannot film without meeting community accountability" (1995, p. 97).

Sarah Pink refers to such collaborative work as "applied visual anthropology," an approach she defines as "using visual anthropological theory, methodology and practice to achieve applied non-academic ends" (2007, p. 6). By non-academic ends, she specifically refers to "social intervention…a problem-solving practice that involves collaborating with research participants and aims to bring about some form of change" (Pink, 2007, pp. 11-12).

However, this approach, like any other, poses challenges, which helps to account for the tensions Tom and I encountered during the editing process.

Although these tensions were not insurmountable, they do raise uncomfortable questions about the way such relationships can develop. I wrote of how, for instance, my motivations shifted to include, in addition to helping Tom spread his message, creating an aesthetically pleasing film that could enhance my reputation as a filmmaker. Lassiter writes of how "agreements often shift in new contexts where the power of original discussion becomes compromised by other factors beyond our direct control and beyond our vision of what the project can and will become" (2005, p. 96). Of course, my motivations were not beyond my direct control, but I certainly did not anticipate that my focus would change and develop like it did.

Doing collaborative ethnography is also about recognizing that "promises, agreements, and commitments are temporal" (Lassiter, 2005, p. 91). They change, because people and the situations in which they work (together) change. I did not anticipate as well as I could have the changes that would occur during the project, which led to the moment at which I authorized my own artistic vision over Tom's. This acknowledgment led me to reflect further on the way in which commitments like the ones I was trying to make must be continually negotiated to account for the vagaries of fieldwork.

During my research, my ethical commitments ran into roadblocks, and I was unable to satisfactorily navigate them all. In response to the exchanges Tom and I had, which were often quite engaging and fruitful – if also sometimes stressful – I began to reconceptualize the ethical engagement I had been hoping for.

Instead of an ongoing obligation to Tom, I now think of our experience as a mutual negotiation, one that was never finished because our relationship will never be finished, despite how remote we may become from one another. My project was always going to be based on a great deal of negotiation. I always knew that because of the people I was originally hoping would participate, I would have to do a great deal of negotiating needs, desires, restrictions and refusals. Subjects' obligations inevitably meet and crash, especially over time. Compromises have to be made. But there is nothing necessarily wrong with this. It is just a matter of negotiating all of these factors as a project evolves. Working out our differences actually ended up requiring more collaboration, more contact. And the film was stronger as a result.

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