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The trouble with writing reality

ABSTRACT

*Next time a character leaps off the page and tries to strangle you, you'd better have a shotgun handy to blow the mongrel's head off. No, this is not a quote from Hunter S. Thompson, it is a description of our work as playwrights and documentary makers, occasionally described as 'real fiction'. This paper explores the dilemmas of the writer from the perspectives of the creator and his/her creation. By integrating the creative process of theatre and documentary making with the philosophical perspectives of Wittgenstein and Lacan, we propose that the relationship between the creator and the object of his creation is complicated by the process and fraught with ethical difficulties. These issues are explored through the work of Dundler and Welsh, as theatre writers and documentary makers. The plethora of problems encountered through the process of creating work that is founded in human relations is explored with specific reference to *The Biography of a Battler* (La Mama Theatre 2012) and *The No Teeth People* (Radio National 2010/2012).*

KEYWORDS

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The necessity for fiction was probably born of the problem of taboo on certain revelations. It was not only a need of the imagination but an answer to the limitations placed on portrayal of others.¹

(Nin 1976:155)

The primary ethical question of how one ought to treat one's neighbour becomes crucial when one is recreating the neighbour through a practice we call 'real fiction theatre-making'.² This has a relationship with other forms of performance such as documentary theatre or verbatim theatre, both of which attempt to represent reality with an enhanced sense of authority (Wake 2010, Mumford and Wake 2010). Where documentary theatre uses the conversational engagement to establish facts and verbatim theatre to collect quotations for use on stage, real fiction records and observes this engagement and considers it a form of theatre. 'Real fiction theatre-making', whilst paying attention to factual detail, accepts that the creative product of the play is made from an engagement between the 'subject', or source of the represented experience, and the creator or inventor of the plot.

This notion of conversation and invention is considered at length in this paper, as well as the ethical problem it creates. For this task we claim that the construction of the world as language, fundamental to the work of Wittgenstein, is crucial to an understanding of 'real fiction theatre'. The question of how we perceive the world and, consequently, how we behave in the world, both as writers and subjects, is contested in this paper, using Wittgenstein's theories of language and perception. And we will use Lacan's 'mirror stage' concept to view the unfolding of a real fiction play in its making and execution. We will further examine the background and context of real fiction theatre and by stepping through the process of a real fiction play we will investigate the challenges of representation, for the playwright and the character. And drawing toward conclusion we will also examine how the playwright/poet reacts to their own representation and the new ethical considerations this poses.

Lacan's 'mirror stage' needs some clarification here. The mirror stage finds its origins as a psychoanalytic concept, referring to a stage of the child's development where

1 Anais Nin is alluding to infiltrating a form beyond her diary writing and fiction writing.

2 This concept has previously been explored in the paper 'Real Fiction and the Biography of Voice' presented at PopCAANZ Auckland 2010.

he/she recognises him/herself in the mirror. Quite suddenly he/she becomes conscious that the hand in the mirror is *his/her* hand (Lacan 2001: 1285-90). However, Lacan's 'mirror stage' concept has recently been used as a way of understanding the unity or disunity of the 'self' and the 'image' by creating the contrast of the self acting and experiencing as well the image that appears in the mirror (Lynch 2008).

As writers, our engagement with the world objectifies subjects so as to represent them for our own purposes. The social subject in conversation becomes the character on stage. The philosophical distinction between the subject of the knower and the object of what is known is eroded because the writer situates him/herself at the centre of existence. When the writer enters your world, he or she becomes the knower, and if the subject of your being takes his fancy, you become the object. The author writes about you but when their writing is complete, it is not about you. You are recreated in his vision so that, in the world of the play, you are *not* yourself. The problem with this is that you are yourself and you are real in your own context, in real social surroundings, quite distinct from the artifice invented by the author.

Real fiction should be viewed as an experience that is expansive, employing various creative approaches to an empirically real and genuine human experience. This also includes the documentation of the work, through radio and film, explored later in this paper. In the wider sense real fiction takes stock from writers such as Hunter S. Thompson, *The Beats*, and representations of reality through Anais Nin and Henry Miller.

The process for making 'real fiction theatre', however, is quite specific. In the case of verbatim theatre, the idea of taking direct quotes and reproducing them in the context of performance is said to give the work more factual authority. Documentary theatre also collects and collates the facts of an event and proposes that theatre can give us social insight and understanding by presenting these on stage (Wake 2010, Mumford and Wake 2010). As distinct from Documentary and Verbatim theatre, we claim the work of constructing 'real fiction theatre' involves creating and exploring 'conversational realities' (Shotter 1993). The writing of real fiction theatre, which involves observing and recording 'voices' from the author's experience, can create original drama for popular culture audiences and also make a social statement.

The play is nine-tenths removed from the truth, at least nine-tenths removed from the truth...[But] the part describing the mental hospital, the 'judgement area' and the way it [the play] says that you're brought in there drugged and in a gown and they're all there well-dressed, elegant surroundings or whatever, and, yeah, they're standing in judgement of you (Interview, Man on mental health, YouTube. Accessed 15/9/2013).

This is a direct quote from the subject of the play, *The Biography of a Battler (The Battler)*. He is speaking of the play's content. His comment on the play and its relationship to "the truth" is borne from his recognition of himself and his family in the play. This quote is significant because it reveals the relationship between real fiction and "the truth". The events in the play have little relationship to the truth, except as a means of the author expressing specific observations about the character. However, the character is sourced from the speech rhythms of the real subject. Hence, the subjects' observation here that the play is '...nine-tenths removed from the truth...'

Realism is a bad word. In a sense everything is realistic. I see no line between the imaginary and the real. I see much reality in imagination.³ (Fellini quoted in Sarris 1967).

What gives me the audacity to believe that I exist? How do I come to be the one who experiences, while the other is merely an object in my existence? Indeed, it is possible that the other does not exist. It is unlikely that you are a figment of my imagination but entirely possible. For whilst I can see you, touch you and hear you, I cannot truly be in your body nor can I think with your mind. I cannot smell through your nose or hear through your ears. In order to understand the phenomenon of your seeing, hearing, smelling etc., to know how it feels for you to experience 'x', I must be you. Even if I have experienced 'x' I cannot know what the experience of 'x' is for you.

Whilst this is not a philosophical investigation as such, Descartes' radical uncertainty has left its footprint on the social sciences in general and Lacan is said to describe a state of anxiety that comes from the awareness one can be viewed (Descartes

³ Fredric

1647, Lacan 2001). And so the philosophy goes that I am not only myself but the image of myself. I exist along with my mirror image, a caricature distorted by the reflection process. (Lacan 2001) Perhaps the mirror glass is foggy or cracked and certainly Lacan describes the infant as not being alone. The importance of mother's presence as a prop (to hold the infant up to the mirror) is not understated in Lacan's view. He also mentions a libidinal encounter, suggesting both a social and traumatic interaction with the other. The existence of the other's gaze, according to Lacan, comes from a realization at the mirror stage that one is not only oneself and one's image but the being of the self can be viewed by the other, interpreted and given meaning that is not intentional and is perhaps not always one's own. We are not only ourselves 'being in the world', we are also the image of ourselves as we see in the mirror (or as we are seen by the other/mother).

Like the realization at the mirror stage that one can be seen, the experience of being written can produce the very anxiety of which Lacan speaks. This is associated with the realization that one has an external appearance as well as an internal experience. That is, the knowledge that one is an object in reality as well as a subject in one's own narrative. We claim that this phenomenon is experienced by the subject who encounters and is objectified by the writer.

The Battler is borne from the voices of real people, in some instances the words of these people have been directly inserted into the work, in others they have been symbolized by inserting imaginary characters. This is the beginning of a long unearthing process, between the writer and the subject(s), from which many different and extreme views can grow.

The real people are at first shocked that they had been represented in a work of fiction and then offended and distressed as they begin to see elements of themselves in the represented characters. When the author began to receive phone calls from the real people, claiming the play affected them in 'x' or 'y' manner; that they were being portrayed as a 'bad mother' or a 'mentally ill man', or a victim of incest, it seemed impossible for him to explain the representation to them. This is partially because he was talking to the objects of his creation rather than the subject of their experience. Whether they were entitled to it or not, they felt they owned the work and by disrespecting their

wishes, he was somehow abusing their trust. Not only did they feel the gaze of the other, but they sensed the gaze was somehow sinister and threatening or disturbing.

WAYS OF PERCEIVING ‘THE BATTLER’

In the program for *The Battler*, the author claims that the writing is not a play, not theatre, nothing vaguely resembling that art-form. This also tackles the process of contradictions that is real fiction, by attempting *not to be* theatre, but something else operating with wider terms of reference in investigation. Inevitably though once it is presented upon a stage it becomes and a form of theatre. Despite the fact that it is programmed as a play in a theatre, the author considers it his job to authentically represent the experience of those characters. Using his own experience and observations of their conversational speech rhythms the author constructs a social statement circling around a critique of the mental health system.

The events themselves do not actually occur but the writing is like a painting of a scene or various scenes observed by the author. These include various interactions with mental health professionals; doctors and nurses. The author describes their behaviour toward the patient to be generally dehumanizing and an objectification. Therefore they are the objective voice of authority for the patient and revert to speaking subjects in their interactions with each other. This is represented in the play:

Nurse 2: I’m a nurse. I believe this man is dying and his ailment is not physical. What am I if I simply let that happen?

Nurse 1: He’s not dying of some imaginary ailment that is as you put it ‘not physical’ and, even if he was, it’s not our job to do anything about it!

Nurse 2: Then what is our job?

Nurse 1: Sometimes I wonder about you, Julia. I mean which side are you on?

Nurse 2: What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

Nurse 1: Whatever the fuck you want it to mean! Let’s give this loony his lollies so I can get home and watch the cricket on the telly (Welsh 2009).

Wittgenstein states that ‘If you see the leaf in a particular way, you use it in such and such a way according to such and such rules’ (1953: 35). This articulates the transgression of the writer and the way in which the rules are broken in the real fiction

research/creative process. Consider the context of a ‘conversation’ between a medical doctor and a patient or a policeman and a criminal suspect, a welfare worker and a client. Such power relationships are subject to ‘duty of care’ laws in Australia and are defined by pre-established boundaries, in such and such a way according to such and such rules.

If you see this leaf as a sample of ‘leaf shape’ in general, you see it differently to someone who regards it as a sample of this particular shape (Wittgenstein 1953: 35). How does Wittgenstein’s statement relate to the practice of ‘real fiction’? Supposing the ‘leaf’ constitutes the conversation and the ‘leaf shape’ its speech rhythms as perceived by the writer. We claim that these relationships involve the objectification of one of the conversational participants. When one writes the real person, he/she says ‘but I was just living, why can’t you leave me alone?’

In *The Battler*, the protagonist has a mother. Both of these characters are based on real people, but in their new context, they *become* representations on stage. Indeed, this performance is reviewed as a piece of theatre. The reviews are then read by the real people who are shocked. They not only identify themselves but see themselves being psychoanalysed and/or criticized:

Welsh makes it very clear in his script that the operational procedures for mental health in this country are failing. [0] [But he] is more interested in examining the intimate dynamic of the family, the suppression of unsavoury family secrets, and the cancerous effect of guilt and shame upon people who have no way of understanding and articulating these powerful human emotions. Central to this examination is the presence of Teddy Rose's mother. It is difficult not to conclude that her actions have been irresponsible, if not implicitly vituperative (Reck 2012).

In this extract from the review, the intention of the play is clearly stated, but so is an implicit accusation toward the mother. To others this Freudian aspect may seem less overt. However, like the play, the review exists in public discourse. When the mother reads this and what follows, she becomes extremely distressed:

As the play progresses it becomes apparent that within the Rose family, there has occurred an inherited stream of paedophilic behaviour. Teddy's father was in the habit of rolling around on the living room floor with visiting neighbourhood

children. Furthermore, this trait was absorbed and adopted by Teddy Rose himself, resulting in the sexual assault of his sister (Reck 2012).

From their perspective, the play was about them and everything that happened in the play was an accusation. While the real person on which the speech rhythms of the protagonist was based was aware of the plays content for quite sometime and knew it had been performed, it was not until a season was booked in his own city of residence and his mother became concerned, that the family became hostile toward the play. In actuality, two of the six characters were based on members of the family who made the serious threats of legal action: the mother and son. The character of the sister was entirely fictional and based on research relating to incest survivors. This research was both conversational and library based.

The problem here comes from the primary practice ‘real fiction’ research. That is, taking the voices of people from empirical experience and using their speech patterns to comment on a social issue. In this instance, the real person seems to understand the process well enough to see himself in the fiction, but also as removed from his own experience. The mother seems unable to do so.

This may constitute a further revelation or insight into being the mother of a man in the mental health system, or indeed being a mother in general. Once the creative process unveils this revelation, the ethical question of how the author ought to respond becomes the focus of the work and the task of putting on a play becomes ‘not putting on a play’. The social comment becomes about the sense of guilt a mother feels and the response is *to not* shine a light on such issues. The writer’s gaze is translated in the mother’s world as a threat of surveillance. She feels the extent of the threat to be so painful as to respond with legal action should the play be remounted. To continue with this work against the will of the subjects of its inspiration would be against the ethos of creating the work.

‘THE NO TEETH PEOPLE’ & WITTGENSTEIN ON TIME AND MEANING

Wittgenstein says ‘when I heard this word, it meant x to me’ (1953: 174), claiming this refers to a point in time (the ‘when’) and a way of using or perhaps even hearing the word. Wittgenstein then refers to time and action and says that ‘essential references’ of

an utterance combine with the context (time and way of talking) to create meaning. When we say to someone “I have no idea what you are talking about” (though I hear you and understand your language), it means we are hearing the content in the context but are not familiar with the ‘essential references’.

The No Teeth People,⁴ as an audio piece, travels between the different genres of documentary, poetry and play. It also has several guises in its changing contexts, though the content remains essentially the same. Those contexts include the streets from which the data is sourced and the subjects/characters to whom *The No Teeth People* refers. There is the context of the work in its street book form, being the origin of the work. It remains on the street but also becomes a reflection on the culture it describes, the world in which the reader walks. The ‘no teeth people’ exist primarily as beings, as subjects that are objectified to a degree by the small street poetry book. Then Radio National makes a documentary seemingly objectifying the author of the book. The writer, who has experienced having no teeth, transforms from a person into the object of the ‘no teeth people’. The objectification that occurs as a result of the writer’s gaze in *The No Teeth People* backfires, when the poet, Scott Welsh, is objectified by the de-contextualisation of himself, through his representation in the radio piece.

The idea that one is being viewed, and in this case heard, objectified and that this objectification alters the subject is consistent throughout the process. By claiming the voice of the ‘no teeth people’, Scott ‘Scary Teeth’ Welsh (now the character) in fact takes the same voice away. By identifying himself as a ‘speaking subject’ all the rest become objects. The producer edits the prose poem, overlays it with interviews, adds dramatic atmosphere to create the malleable subject with its various voices. The final work directly or indirectly objectifies Welsh, so that his voice is taken from him, he becomes one of the ‘no teeth people’ of which he speaks. He is no longer the writer of the text but the subject matter for a documentary, a specimen being observed rather than being the observer.

The producer acknowledges the writer’s resentment at being portrayed as a ‘homeless man’ rather than a poet, on the ABC program’s webpage when the piece is re-aired. (360 documentaries 20 May 2012) The writer has no control over how he is

⁴ See Dundler & Welsh (2008) ‘The No Teeth People’. An experiment in form where Dundler approached Welsh to edit and present his poem/story for Radio National.

interpreted or portrayed. What is at issue for this writer is not the idea that he has experienced periods of homelessness but that he is stigmatized as a ‘homeless man’. A stark comparison exists with the subject in *The Battler*, who sees his identity eclipsed by the portrayal of himself as ‘a mentally ill man’.

The notable difference between the objectified subject of *The Battler* and Scott ‘Scary Teeth’ Welsh is that the former is inescapably contained in an identity, a skin he wishes to shed. Whilst the latter, Welsh, himself a poet and artist, is able to embrace and willingly participate in his own objectification. In this sense he is also re-subjectified by participating in the creation and promotion of the documentary in which he is objectified. Whether he likes it or not he will be perceived as one of the ‘no teeth people’. He accepts these perceptions as part of his ‘working conditions’. While the subject from *The Battler* is also scarred by the creative process, to a degree he recognises it as a platform for his views and sharing of experience within the mental health system. (Interview, Man on mental health, YouTube. Accessed 15/9/2013).

In ‘real fiction’ both writer and subject of the writing find themselves in the same social world with remarkable similarities in experience. This phenomenon ought to create empathy but this is not always the case. It still lingers, this whisper of how one is seen and perceived by the other. This complex social world is the site of inquiry for the playwright’s investigation and rarely presents itself as a simple and cohesive narrative. Rather, it is delivered through the chaotic and painful world of human experience. The problem of how one reconciles the ethical challenges of what one ought to write, with what one must write if one is to be truthful, remains the single most difficult task for the writer of plays and documentaries.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dusk Dundler graduated with a BA in Journalism from Charles Sturt University, Bathurst. Soon after his gonzo review on the 2000 World Economic Forum blockade was published in independent filmmaker magazine. He has travelled the country with his stories and produced documentaries for ABC Radio National, including *Mirrar Ground*; *The Last Train to Murwillumbah*; and 'The No-Teeth People'. Dusk has reported for the Koori Mail on nuclear and cultural issues from Kakadu, Northern Territory. He also fulfilled a nonfiction writing mentorship with author and rock journalist Andrew McMillan. His film on Scott Welsh's 'the Biography of a Battler' screened at Newtown Flicks Film Festival winning an Audience Award. Dundler has gained a Graduate Diploma in Writing from the University of Technology, Sydney. Studying creative nonfiction with author Mark Mordue and poetry under poet/academic Martin Harrison. Dusk's poem 'Last Mountain Telecast' was published in *The Prague Revue* and he was also short-listed for the Judith Wright/Overland poetry prize in 2013. His Essay, 'The Myth of Charlie McMahon' is published in the *Griffith Review*: 42.

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Scott Welsh is a poet and playwright. He holds a Master of Philosophical Studies (by Research) from Deakin University, Australia. He combines his role as a social theorist with being an actor and playwright. He has collaborated with various friends and theatre makers over the past 10 years, including Lloyd Jones (La Mama Theatre Melbourne), Kylie Gral (Melbourne Theatre Director/Drama Teacher) and Elnaz Sheshgelani (Theatre/puppet maker). His plays have been performed in Fringe festivals, the La Mama theatre (Melbourne) and on ABC Radio National. He collaborated with Dusk Dundler in a radio documentary inspired by his long poem, 'The No-Teeth People', broadcast on ABC Radio National. The 2012 performance of his play 'The Biography of a Battler' was performed at La Mama Theatre over the course of 'Mental Health Week' as a part of the Melbourne Fringe Festival. *Barcode 30!!7 307: Exploration into domestic violence and criminal behaviour* was performed at The La Mama Carlton Courthouse in 2002-3. He has sold his poetry on the street throughout Australia and presented papers at various national and international conferences, exploring his playwriting practice. He is currently studying a PhD in Drama Education at Victoria University.

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