

Turning Research into Film: Trevor Hearing speaks with Kip Jones about the process of creating the short research-based film, *Rufus Stone*

Kip Jones, with Trevor Hearing

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

—F Scott Fitzgerald *The Great Gatsby*



PHOTO: *Rufus Stone* crew filming in rural Dorset, England © Kip Jones 2011

Introduction

Kip Jones is Reader in Qualitative Research and Performative Social Science at Bournemouth University in the UK. He has spent more than ten years developing the use of tools from the arts and humanities to research and/or disseminate social science knowledge, or a Performative Social Science. What "performative" refers and relates to is the communicative powers of research and the natural involvement of an "audience", whether that be a group of peers or a group of students, a physical audience or a cyber audience, even a solitary reader of a journal or

a book. This is good news, not only for participants in research studies, who can often be involved in producing subsequent performative outputs, but also for the wider community to whom our findings should be directed.

Trevor Hearing leads television and film production studies at Bournemouth's Media School, and has years of experience working in the television industry as a documentary filmmaker. His recently completed PhD examined the possibilities of using media as research tools.

Kip and Trevor have worked on many joint projects, including documenting the filming of *Rufus Stone* and producing a trailer for it.

Background

The short, professionally made film *Rufus Stone* is the key output of the three-year 'Gay and Pleasant Land?' research project led by Bournemouth University academic, Dr Kip Jones. This project about positioning, ageing and gay life in rural South West England and Wales was a work package in the UK-wide New Dynamics of Ageing Project, "Grey and Pleasant Land?: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Connectivity of Older People in Rural Civic Society". The projects were funded by Research Councils UK. The film was produced by Parkville Pictures, London.

The stories that form the foundation of the script for *Rufus Stone* are entirely based upon research undertaken by Jones and his team from the University's School of Health and Social Care and the Media School and with the assistance of a citizens' Advisory Committee. The film's 'fictional' story was created over time using composite characters and situations, all uncovered in the Gay and Pleasant Land? Research Project, through in-depth biographic life story interviews, focus groups, and actual site visits to the rural locations where older gay or lesbian citizens were living.

Josh Appignanesi, who also directed the feature film, *The Infidel* written by David Baddeil, directed *Rufus Stone*. Appignanesi, who wrote the final script for *Rufus Stone*, outlines the plot:

The story dramatises the old and continued prejudices of village life from three main perspectives. Chiefly it is the story of Rufus, an 'out' older gay man who was exiled from the village as a youth and reluctantly returns from London to sell his dead parents' cottage, where

he is forced to confront the faces of his estranged past. Of these, Abigail is the tattletale who 'outed' Rufus 50 years ago when he spurned her interest. She has become a lonely deluded lush. Flip, the boy Rufus adored, has also stayed in the village: a life wasted in celibacy (occasionally interrupted by anonymous sexual encounters) and denial (who is) looking after his elderly mother. But Rufus too isn't whole, saddled with an inability to return or forgive.

Jones speaks in his role as Executive Producer of the film: "Our hope is that the film will dispel many of the myths surrounding ageing, being gay and life in British rural settings."

Interview

Trevor:

So where did all of this begin, Kip, this turning research into film?

Kip:

From the very beginning, from the inception of the idea of a professionally made film to represent in-depth research—the first thing that motivated me is that a lot of research ends up on the shelf—or in journals on the shelf—not many people read it and it kind of dies a slow death there. In order to have impact in the larger world, I thought it was necessary to move into a field where you could produce something that would be able to be diffused amongst a wider population. So, when I saw a film that Josh (Appignanesi, Director of *Rufus Stone*) had done on dementia (*Ex Memoria*, 2006), I thought, "Ah! This is getting close to the way I'd like to work." So that's where we started from, right there—entering into an unknown world, really, and seeing if it would work.

Trevor:

And you were using this new approach, as you say, to get into an unknown world, telling a truth that was otherwise hidden by the mythology of the English countryside?

Kip:

In terms of the study itself, I knew pretty early on from my own experiences of interfacing with some groups of older people in organisations that particularly represented rural England that there was resistance to our study. I came to realise that there was a great deal of prejudice and a lot of misunderstanding of what being gay or lesbian was even

about—an assumption that even talking about being gay or lesbian meant that you were talking about sex. There were a lot of, as you say, myths that needed to be dispelled and a lot of consciousness-raising that needed to go on.

Trevor:

The film is a culmination of a much deeper level of research, isn't it? Do you think in a way that the film distracts from the depth of the research that was done beforehand?

Kip:

I'm fond of saying that if Performative Social Science is really working well, the areas where we've cobbled together in-depth research and art—or filmmaking in this case—should be seamless, that there truly is a fusion of two disparate fields, science and art, really. What I'm hoping is that the audience will almost forget about an academic approach to the material and be reached on what I consider a deeper emotional level. That's not to say that the research wasn't very, very in-depth and well constructed. Certainly, any project that takes place over three years is almost a gift these days in terms of an opportunity to carry out substantial research. To be able to do in-depth interviews and follow-up interpretation by citizen panels, then to conduct focus groups and to use theatrical interpretation of some of the data—all this wealth of data added to the richness of the story that we finally were able to present to the filmmaker.

For example, the following text is an exemplar of the type of creative writing using the fictional interspersed with the autobiographical that preceded the development of the film's treatment and the subsequent script:

The lapping movement of the water's surface with its shiny viscosity created by the light prompt me to recall those moments. I remember more clearly then, what those flashes of innocent intimacy were like.

Memory is not text, not even remembered action, really. The past is recreated by recollections of an atmosphere, a sound, a temperature. Remembering the arrangement of the furniture often reveals more to me about a moment than the people sitting on it. So is the nature of key moments in our story of young Rufus and Flip.

Images such as dappled sunlight are not a routine physical reality. They are as much a precise instance in the lifecourse as a particular sixteenth birthday. Our first experience of mottled sunlight is a rite of passage, a singularly unique occurrence in our young lives.

Roll the film. Capture it.

Kip:

Perhaps if I explain a bit here. As we observe throughout life, certain cultural images become private and iconic. They twist and turn and eventually morph in various ways to be included as our own graphic memories (I shall always remember Mary Gergen's recounting of the Midwest grain storage towers from her childhood in my interview with her [<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/viewArticle/554>]). These images are truly Ethno-Graphic. These visual memories become imbued with both intense cultural and personal meaning.

Trevor:

Was it a risk making the film?

Kip:

I think so! It was a risk in the sense that it was doing something that hadn't been done at this level before. There certainly have been films made involving social science projects and they tend to be a film of a theatrical production put on by participants in a project. No one has gone to the next stage, which is, in a sense, fictionalising the research—and that's what we've done here. By using composite characters we've created a fiction in the end. They're still true to the research and even lines that they say in the dialogue often are verbatim lines that people said in the interviews. The story, however, is fictional—it didn't really happen exactly as it is told in the film to any one person. Using fiction we were able to enhance not only the interpretive utility of the research, but also the 'entertainment value', and by entertainment value I mean that in the strictest terms of entertainment as something that makes people really think and makes them think at a very deep level.

Trevor:

In terms of the premise behind your film, is it promoting the role of the artist as researcher?

Kip:

I like to say, "Who best to translate the excitement of discovery to an audience but an artist? How better to take sometimes dry and tedious data and transform it into story and action?" This is the premise behind our performative efforts.

Trevor:

I like the idea that you've mentioned about telling 'your story' –that becoming a moment for you. It is very much embodying you as a researcher as well.

Kip:

One of the things that I have been exploring in the past five years is auto-ethnography, which is using your own story to research or to enrich a certain area of concern or interest in an investigation. Again, I return to my example of the auto-ethnographic/fictional writing upon which the final script was built:

Close your eyes and recollect this patterned lightness on the patchwork English country landscape and you will see young Flip—dark, tan, laughing—happy to be with you. There has been no other instance in your life like it. You wish that this moment will go on forever, but, even in your youth, you know it will not be so. You have been taught this in songs and they are sad ones.

Your soul has always been an old man's, your cautious, fearful, doubting heart. We are forged as we will be early in life and spend the rest of it unravelling that fact. The child somehow knows that as a man you will seek to recreate this moment over and over again and so you prepare yourself for such a journey, even in your youth. Play the Mahler 5th. You understand it intimately.

You and Flip walk over hills towards a wood. This is not a memorised landscape, however. It is a recollection of a three-dimensional physicality consisting of the soil under foot, the sound of the swish of tall grass, and the crunchiness of pebbles mixed with earth. The intensity of the English sky's summer blueness creates a light pressure against your skin. The warm country air is more uncontaminated than any you will ever breathe again. His arm around your neck as you walk is the last uncorrupted act of commitment that you will ever experience. This is the purist state of coupling.

You are in the stream at a point where the water, the great purifier, creates a deep pool. The chilly water laps against your body, as you will lap against his. The surface of the water makes a fluid partition that allows grazing against his body beneath it seem easier, less obvious, but still dangerous. The pretence is played out above the surface, the risk and the release beneath. If he ever objected ... but he never did. The physicality of your relationship remains in its purist state.

You can smell him on his shirt that you have innocently taken home with you. That night in your single bed under the farmhouse's eaves you lay next to this piece of worn cotton clothing and dream of his unpolluted perfect being. The shininess of his young dark skin, his naturally sun licked hair, his warm arm around your neck, his smile's innocence, laughing, always laughing.

Kip:

I have realised, somewhat late in life, that the 'love-sick' feeling in the pit of our stomachs that we sometimes experience remains the same, whether seventeen or seventy. The only difference now is that I have the visual reference points with which to tell that story again.

I tend to see auto-ethnography when it's working best as using myself as a conduit to other people and other people's stories and events in their lives. This became quite apparent to me when I was writing the treatment for the film. We knew what the story was and we knew what the characters were doing, but we needed detail. I realised that I had to rely on my own experience as well.

For instance, I was starting to write about Rufus and his grandfather and the easiest way for me to do that was, in a sense, to embody the character of Rufus by recalling my own grandfather. My memory at that very moment of writing was sitting on my grandfather's lap and his cheap grandfather clock ticking away in the background. So I wove that into the treatment. In the end the clock is a very important piece of the story and symbol, representing time passing, our memories of the past and, in the end, what happens to the clock in the film is very powerful. This was a place where by reaching into my own story and embodying the character I was able to really enrich the story of the other person.

Rufus reconsiders the countryside of his youth as he drives.

It is a memory of a five-year old boy sitting on his grandfather's lap. Granddad's hand, rough and worn from working the land, his thumbnail somehow permanently split, reaches into the pocket of his tattered woollen trousers and magically produces a cellophane-wrapped peppermint sweet for the boy. The tall case clock ticks in the background, the same clock that ended up in Rufus' parent's farmhouse hallway. The sound of this clock has always provided him with comfort in times of crisis. It is recollections of his grandfather that most warmly represent the countryside to Rufus.

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Further Resources

Rufus Stone the movie on the web: background, cast and crew and updates on screenings and availability of the film:

<http://www.rufusstonemovie.com/>

<http://microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/rufus-stone/>

Trailer for *Rufus Stone*:

<https://vimeo.com/43395306>

Journal articles:

‘Connecting Participatory Methods in a Study of Older Lesbian and Gay Citizens in Rural Areas’ in the *International Journal of Qualitative Research*.

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/8652>

Exploring Sexuality, Ageing and Rurality in a Multi-Method, Performative Project’ is now available electronically from the *British Journal of Social Work*.

<http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/05/04/bjsw.bcr058.short?rss=1>

Press comment:

Sunday *New York Times*:

“Shunning the Journals, Scholar Brings Work on Older Gays to Life in Film”

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/11/world/europe/11iht-educSide11.html?_r=1

Times Higher Education:

“Camera turns to capture gay and unpleasant land”

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=416473>

BBC Radio 4

“Thinking Allowed” Laurie Taylor talks with Kip Jones about the research behind *Rufus Stone*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017chq4>

Leavy, P. (2012). A review of *Rufus Stone*: The promise of arts-based research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Rev.15), 1-3. Retrieved from

<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/leavy.pdf>

Awards:

Rufus Stone, Grand prize in the Alternative Spirit category and the Youth Jury Award for best GLBT film at the *Rhode Island International Film Festival*, 2012.

Festival Screenings:

Rhode Island International Film Festival (USA); *Jewish Film Festival* (London); *Torino International Film Festival* (Italy).