The Benefits of Content Analysis for Filmmakers

Abstract

In today's mass-mediated society the plethora of available media content has become a ubiquitous pool of potential knowledge that is sourced in the absence of first-person experience about particular issues, events, individual people and communities. The resulting dispositions that lead to corresponding attitudes and behaviour in the real world are shared by spectators, as well as filmmakers. Hence, the way subjects are represented in media reflects these dispositions and provides an indicator for the current socio-cultural reality. An analysis of existing media content offers filmmakers a clearer insight into spectators' dispositions towards the stories and characters in their films, enabling them to challenge, reduce or strategically utilise social or narrative stereotypes and clichés. This article discusses the benefits of using content analysis and its methodology in the context of teaching documentary film practice at undergraduate level, although the same methodology can be used by established filmmakers who aim to engage in a critical or research-led film practice.

Spectators' Dispositions and Media Content

Whether we are engaged in producing a film or in watching one, we subconsciously deploy a range of similar cognitive and affective mechanisms related to our expectations, social schemas, cultural models and ideology (Persson, 2003, pp. 23–24). David Bordwell (1985, p. 32) describes these dispositions as the "prior knowledge and experience" that we derive from our interactions with the everyday world and with other art and media outputs. In fact, it could be argued that, unless we have direct intersocial knowledge of a certain topic or community, our dispositions are largely formed by the media content we have cumulatively consumed. Media scholar Beth Haller (2010, p. 27) explains that an analysis of this content not only acknowledges the mass-mediation of western society, "in which […] citizens understand 'reality' through personal experience and mass media information", but it also reliably reveals the social reality and culture of the moment. Louis Cheskin (cited in Hartley, 2003, p. 128) (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". Hence, any consistencies, or likewise any changes, in media content in terms of what *is* represented, what is *not* represented and *how* it is represented reflect the dispositions of both spectators and filmmakers and frame their comprehension of and behaviour in the real world.

Apart from a number of sociological or philosophical concerns, there are a variety of pragmatic reasons why filmmakers and filmmaking students would benefit from an awareness of spectators' dispositions regarding the topics, stories or characters in their films. These benefits include the potential to challenge or reduce social stereotypes, the ability to achieve greater originality through the avoidance of clichés, and the purposeful use of tropes/clichés/stock characters to streamline narrative exposition, intertextually stimulate spectators or persuade a target audience to adopt a particular attitude or behaviour. By undertaking a content analysis of similar sorts of films during the film's development stage, the filmmaker can strategically and critically inform his/her film practice in terms of both narrative and aesthetic conceptualisation.

Content analysis involves the empirical study and subsequent theoretical analysis of a body of film texts in order to generate knowledge about, for example, production practices, representation or formal common denominators. However, I propose here that the

filmmaker should deploy the content analysis less as an instrument of *analysis* and more as an instrument of *synthesis* – that is, the filmmaker should use the knowledge produced by the empirical study to directly inform the production of his/her own film through a deliberate synthesis of narrative and aesthetic elements, aiming for a particular way of representation and a corresponding audience response. Essentially, this approach to filmmaking is based on Carl Plantinga's concept of the 'filmmaker-audience loop' (2011, p. 30), which reveals the shared assumptions filmmakers and spectators hold about human psychology and behaviour. These assumptions, on the one hand, enable an audience to comprehend particular narrative conventions, and on the other, allow filmmakers to intuitively predict the audience response to these conventions. In this sense, the data generated by content analysis can account for filmmaking and spectatorship practices not only in terms of an actual film text but also in terms of its *con*text, exposing practices linked to intertextuality and, most importantly, to socio-cultural dispositions.

From a spectatorship perspective, content analysis sheds light on filmmaking practices that resonate with audiences but potentially lead to stereotypical or clichéd representations. Such knowledge can help question, subvert or prevent these practices by gauging the spectator's response to the final film artefact in relation to the preconceptions he/she may have acquired through viewing a body of previous films; this sheds light on whether these preconceptions are confirmed, challenged or reconfigured. Such an approach accords with Mike 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 in this way discern connections with or departures from certain traditions of representation. Furthermore, it illuminates the effects of textual strategies on the audience and provides the practitioner with a vocabulary that enables him/her to understand and communicate complex ideas in filmic form, reflexively interrogate the implicit assumptions underpinning formal conventions, and conceive of potential alternatives (pp. 11–12).

In this article, I first heuristically adapt the methods of content analysis to the field of film practice, enabling its application to both factual and fiction films. This is followed by an illustration of how I present it as a research tool to undergraduate documentary filmmaking students. This example reveals how content analysis can be adopted pedagogically by filmmaking tutors and employed by aspiring and established filmmakers alike to critically

examine the use of stock stories, recurrent tropes and stereotypical characters and thus develop a research-led film practice that is reflexive and socio-culturally aware in terms of authorship and spectatorship. I wish to highlight, however, that while the academic rigour of content analysis methodology presented in the first part ensures that it is applicable to a variety of research contexts, the case study itself uses it in a more diluted and less rigorous form since it is tailored to the needs of first-year undergraduate film production students. For a more rigorous, research-led case study relating to my own film practice, see Brylla (2017, 2018).

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. of media texts) for the presence and frequency of specific terms, narratives or concepts. This involves sampling (choosing the media texts), coding (textual analysis for common denominators) and interpretation (drawing conclusions according to the scope of the research). The sampling is carried out according to three criteria: manageability, relevance and representativeness (p. 461).

In terms of manageability, embarking on an empirically rigorous, large-scale quantitative content analysis would inhibit the pragmatic nature of film practice and exceed the research knowledge required, as well as the scholarly knowledge generated. It is more expedient to take a qualitative approach that precludes quantitative coding and limits the research to small, manageable samples. This enables the research-led filmmaker 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 should be chosen when investigating the presence of certain concepts, and this depends on the objective of the content analysis with regards to the film to be made. For instance, the filmmaker may want to research the historical use of a certain trope and relate his/her work to the trope's

historicity. A case in point is Quentin Tarantino who, based on his knowledge of a wide repertoire of fiction films and his understanding of spectatorship, intuitively apprehends how to recycle narrative tropes by simultaneously replicating and mutating them, performing an act of homage, pastiche, innovation and authorship at one and the same time. On the other hand, those films of Abbas Kiarostami that feature female main characters, such as *Ten* (2002) and *Shirin* (2008), not only break with the stereotypical representations of gender roles commonly found in mainstream Iranian films, but also break with universal narrative conventions. Both of these factors have won the filmmaker international acclaim.

In terms of the representativeness of the sample, the key consideration is the target audience. The chosen film texts need to target the same constituency of spectators as the practitioner's own work since this is the most efficient tactic if the aim is to 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 is more useful to filmmakers than the rigorous audience segmenting found in marketing and advertising. Sawyer 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 sampling of film texts by classifying them according 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 group usually includes professionals who have a critical relationship to either the medium (e.g. film scholars) or the concept itself (in the case of racial stereotypes, this would include social activists). In addition, when it comes to the representation of certain demographics, connoisseurs have first-hand knowledge of communities. Thus, because of their more direct intersocial engagement, as well as their 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 use audio-visual means to present a scholarly argument.

Meanwhile, amateurs, according to Sawyer, have been exposed to some experience of the concept and the medium, although not in a professional context (p. 129), which is why they may lack the extensive critical context a connoisseur brings to a film. For example, someone working for a disability charity would have first-hand experience of disabled people and disability issues and would therefore be the target audience for activist, corporate or fundraising films highlighting disability issues. Of course, familiarity with a topic or a certain demographic does not by default entail critical awareness of clichés or stereotypes. A disability charity worker or even a disabled person can be as prone to stereotypical dispositions as someone who has only experienced disability through media representations. However, this is difficult to verify without dedicated audience research involving focus groups, an undertaking that would go far beyond the scope of conventional filmmaking. The boundary between connoisseurs and amateurs is therefore porous. But if the target audience is the general public (the third type), the boundary between this group and the previous two is altogether more clear-cut.

As Sawyer explains, a public audience operates collectively and thus represents the majority of spectators (p. 130). The public does not generally have first-hand experience of the concept in question but is only familiar with it through mediated content that lacks a critical framework, which is why they are not familiar with (and not interested in) relevant critical or theoretical discourses. As a result, when it comes to representation, this group is very prone to the implicit consumption of social stereotypes because these are already 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 guarantee of 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, resulting in a largely homogenous audience response, and is based on the aforementioned concept of the filmmaker-audience loop which refers to the similarities in the dispositions of the filmmaker and the public audience.

This contrasts with the heterogeneous reception and production found in niche (e.g. experimental) domains, whose audience comprises minorities that may well fall into the connoisseur or amateur category.

The public audience is an important sampling criterion when the filmmaker's objective is to instrumentalise, subvert or reconfigure social stereotypes of particular communities. After all, stereotypes operate within the mainstream and therefore need 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. The film practitioner needs to sample the films according to the exhibition platforms that his/her own film is aiming to inhabit. Hence, a content analysis is an important exercise for filmmaking students in particular, and it can be used to encourage them to consider their target audience and the relevant exhibition and distribution strategies during the development stage of their film practice.

The period of the sampled films is also determined by their exposure to the target audience. If a particular age segment plays an important role in the choice of the 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 that certain films made outside this time frame may still inform audience dispositions. This can be the case not only with connoisseur and amateur audiences but also with public audiences who are familiar with certain 'classic' or cult films. The period also needs to allow for the historicity of conventions, some of which are in constant flux while others are in perpetual stagnation.

The socio-cultural context of film samples is not only determined by audience type but also by the context of the film's exhibition. In relation to sampling, the transnational nature of most contemporary films (especially due to the ease of online exhibition and distribution) makes this criterion very difficult to assess. However, when a western public audience is targeted, it is possible to pinpoint certain mainstream films that, due to media globalisation, have been screened at major film festivals, had wide theatrical release and been broadcast on mainstream channels or made available on popular VOD platforms in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. This may represent a gross generalisation but it at least offers a conscious approximation of a cultural context.

When it comes to the coding of film texts through textual analysis and the identification of common denominators, Richard Dyer's (2006) approach to analysing media stereotypes is a useful device. Although it is generally used to identify hegemonic stereotypes, it can also help to pinpoint a variety of other media elements or concepts. Dyer distinguishes between two textual dimensions: the 'structural' (or narrative) dimension, which includes the material and ideological organisation of the world depicted - this includes story and plot (p. 358), and the 'iconographic' (or aesthetic) dimension, which includes the visual and aural signs present in the mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound and editing (p. 357).

The final stage of a content analysis, the interpretation, represents the link between the coded data and the conceptual strategies that the filmmaker applies to his/her own film. As both the sampling and the coding are carried out in an anecdotal and heuristic manner, the interpretation needs to be substantiated by relevant academic literature that 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, which is focused on the representation of disability (Brylla, 2017, 2018). However, adopting the methodology outlined above in the pedagogical context of teaching film production modules (in fiction and documentary) on the undergraduate courses BA Film (University of South Wales) and BA Film Production (University of West London)[i] has proved more of a challenge. My key strategy is to dilute the methodology to a level that allows the pragmatism of filmmaking rather than academic rigour to be foregrounded. This means that the textual analysis of films is situated in the context of film practice (not film studies) seminars, resulting in a less rigorous interrogation of the film texts themselves. Fig. 1 shows the seminar slide I use to introduce content analysis to first-year film practice students. The main aim here is to identify clichés, social stereotypes and inspirations.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Identify

- **Clichés:** overused narrative or stylistic elements that are not considered original
- **Stereotypes:** representations of people that are different to "us" → the "other"; can create social boundaries and lead to prejudice and discrimination; often work through polar opposites
- **Inspirations:** narrative and visual motifs that work well to engage an audience, and that help an audience to immediately recognize certain characters or scenarios

Methodology

- Choose 4-5 films based on your topic and main character's age/profession/social/cultural/ethnic/religious/sexual background – make sure the films match your target audience!
- Do a textual analysis: identify similarities in narrative and stylistic treatment
- Consider whether these are clichés, stereotypes or inspirations
- Underline your findings with statistics and/or articles based on social and cultural research
- Use to plan the treatment in your own film

Figure 1

It is paramount to remind students that this is not merely a formalist exercise in describing structural elements in certain films; rather, it is an approach that can be used to draw conclusions about audience dispositions, especially in relation to a particular demographic – that is, the demographic to which the characters in the students' own films belong. Students usually respond very positively to strategies that aim to reduce 'othering' stereotypes and foster originality in their films, especially if they understand that this may not be simply an ethical endeavour but also a tactic that will impress film festival selectors, commissioning editors, producers, clients and peers. I also emphasise the benefits of identifying inspirational motifs in other films. This often alleviates the anxieties of first-year students over lacking advanced narrative and aesthetic knowledge, since textual analysis offers good points of departure for their filmic treatment. In terms of fiction, it provides students with tangible ideas for their 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 the content analysis contains most of the aspects discussed earlier. Its concrete application to the students' own projects is later monitored in tutorials and in-class presentations, and tutor and peer feedback helps refine the sampling, coding (textual analysis) and interpretation. I also prompt students to use findings from social or

cultural research to theoretically substantiate their conclusions, in order to compensate somewhat for the lack of rigour in the 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 by matching and subverting their expectations (fig. 2). For instance, for documentary production, I use the example of two contrasting documentary films presenting young African women to a western public audience. This resonates with the demographics of the student cohort that, although predominantly western, contains a high proportion of young black British women of African heritage. The first example, *The Cut* (2009, Linda May Kallestein), features the issue of FGM (female genital mutilation). After viewing a clip from the film, students immediately identify western stereotypes that schematically represent these women as young mothers, living in rural villages, who are dominated by the men and the older women of the village, and subjected to archaic traditions – these stereotypes also raise the issue of intersectionality in relation to gender, culture and age.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Clichés: overused narrative or stylistic elements that are not considered original

Stereotypes: representations of people that are different to "us" → the "other"; can create social boundaries and lead to prejudice and discrimination; often work through polar opposites

Inspirations: narrative and visual motifs that work well to engage an audience, and that help an audience to immediately recognize certain characters or scenarios

The Cut (2009, Linda May Kallestein)   Ouaga Girls (2017, Theresa Traore Dahlberg)

Figure 2

There is no need to show more samples since I explain 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* (2017, Theresa Traore Dahlberg), a documentary that depicts a group of women who attend a school for car mechanics in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou. By experiencing these diametrically opposed representations, students realise that unlike *The Cut*, *Ouaga Girls* breaks with traditional and culture-specific gender roles to portray their characters in a more multi-layered fashion. The young women are working in a typically male trade and appear in the film as the agents of their own lives: they freely pursue their career aspirations and leisure activities within a modern, urban environment, confidently using the technology around them. By juxtaposing these two examples, students also become aware of narrative and stylistic elements that are indeed ideological in nature. For instance, *The Cut* uses the western director's voice-over as a narrative glue between the women's interviews, and the interviews themselves are specifically focused on the subjects of hardship and subjugation. From a post-colonial perspective, this western mediator, who singles out negative aspects of the women's lives and refuses to provide them with a significant voice, is problematic. On the other hand, *Ouaga Girls* uses an observational style which encourages the audience to directly engage with the screen characters. In addition, the narrative focuses not only on the positive but also the negative and ambiguous aspects of these women's lives, creating more nuanced character portraits. Of course, it is important to explain to students that social stereotypes do not constitute misrepresentations per se but these can emerge if such 'outgroup' representations become frequent, homogenous and simplistic rather than occasional, heterogeneous and multi-layered.

The step from learning about and understanding a methodology to applying it successfully, however, is far from straightforward. For instance, only about seventy per cent of students apply content analysis to their practice, and only about fifty per cent do so successfully (i.e. in the critical way intended).[ii] One reason for this may be that the content analysis is currently only one aspect of a larger research presentation and preproduction folder, and time constraints significantly reduce its scope. In future, this could be compensated for by

using it as a stand-alone assessed exercise, such as a mini-presentation to the students' peers or as a blog task in the regular research blog that forms part of their individual assessment.

Nevertheless, I have encountered some exemplary applications of content analysis in my students' work. For instance, one group of students produced a documentary about children and technology. As they outlined in their research presentation,[1] their samples were limited to only two (fig. 3), both targeting a western public audience. However, their coding revealed some very interesting common denominators not only in terms of clichés and stereotypes (fig. 4) but also in stylistic inspirations, such as using reaction shots of the children interacting with technology, as well as close-ups of technological devices, awarding the objects narrative significance and agency (fig. 3). The students also framed their content analysis with a wide number of research studies based in the fields of social science and cultural studies, including an empirical study indicating that the media may be premature in demonising the use of technology by children (fig. 5). Their resulting documentary, *A Day in the Life of Shasmeen*, is (unlike the two schematic film samples figured in the content analysis) a nuanced and multi-layered character portrait from the child's rather than the parents' perspective, which avoids painting a black-and-white picture of the impact of technology on young children (fig. 6).

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[1] All slides shown here are from the original student presentations but have been slightly tweaked in terms of grammar, spelling, expression and formatting in order to convey their ideas effectively, given that the reader of this article cannot benefit from the students' clarification, as I was able to in the seminars.
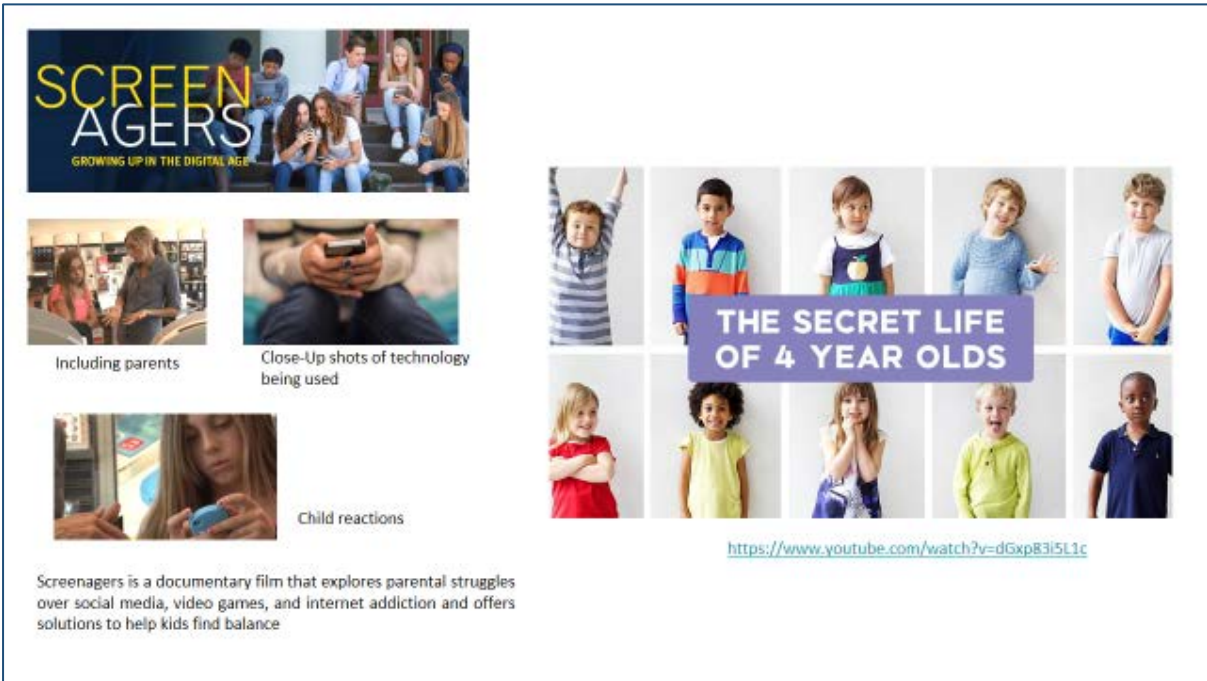
Figure 3

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 use the sport itself as the main narrative drive, employing aesthetic strategies to film the training in a poetic and highly stylised manner. However, after their content analysis (fig. 7) of mainly fiction films (their rationale was that audience dispositions towards boxers are mainly informed by fiction films, not documentaries), they decided that including other biographical dimensions, especially intellectual and non-sports-related activities, would create a more nuanced and original film. As a result, their film offered an intimate character portrait, juxtaposing Jamal's boxing with his job of running a clothing business, introducing these as two (professional) aspects of the same character.

Figure 7

Conclusion

In summary, content analysis offers an efficient strategy for gauging the spectators' and the filmmaker's own dispositions, including the tendency towards stereotyping. It is also instrumental for the filmmaker to consider alternative narrative and aesthetic forms of representation, or to successfully deploy clichés or stereotypes for the purposes of narrative

comprehension or intertextual pleasure (e.g. pastiche). Thus, despite the case study's focus being on social and cultural stereotypes, content analysis can also provide points of reference as to how certain topics or established portrayals can engage spectators and how pre-existing knowledge of the target audience can be built upon. In a pedagogical context, using content analysis during the research stage of filmmaking proves especially valuable as it raises students' critical awareness of their target audience and of 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 a 'third culture'. This refers back to C. P. Snow's (1993) idea that western intellectual life is split between 'the two cultures' – namely, the sciences and the humanities. For Snow, this represented a major hindrance to pragmatically solving the world's problems. Brockman's 'third culture' represents the mediating agent between the sciences and the humanities. Given the current academic landscape, where interdisciplinarity and bricolage are increasingly encouraged as means of bridging not only seemingly incompatible disciplines but also theory and practice, as well as industry and the academy, the link between social science methods and film practice within a humanities context can offer a range of practical and theoretical opportunities for filmmakers and research-led practitioners.

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[i] Both courses have had cohort sizes of 40-60 students when the data for this case study was gathered. Whilst the courses focus on film production, there is a thirty-five percent component of theory, which encompasses film studies and cultural studies. However, practice-oriented and theory-oriented modules are separate and have usually few inter-curricular links; thus, content analysis provides an important bridge between filmmaking and critical film analysis.

[ii] This is based on implementing content analysis and monitoring the students' deployment of it over two years.