Comrades and Curators
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This article shares the findings of a visual literacy project with museum curators and film educators. The research explores the mediation of social history and politics, the interplay of personal and professional curation and the role of reflexive visual literacy in understanding mediated identities.

The project connected three museums around *Comrades*, the Bill Douglas film about the Tolpuddle Martyrs. First, this article explores the relationship between *Comrades* as a film text, the curation of the director's collection of magic lanterns and other optical artifacts, the situating of a lanternist as pivotal to the representation of social history in the film and the different curations of this social history in the museums in Exeter, Tolpuddle and Dorchester. Second, it shares the findings of a visual literacy fieldwork intervention, where films were used by the three museum curators and a film academics' network to 'map' their mediated identities and curational practices with a particular focus on personal and professional transformations.

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> I saw that the lanternist indulges in transformations, in magical transformations and I saw him transforming himself …. the transforming showman. (A Conversation with Bill Douglas, Bridport Film Society, 1987).

This application of visual literacy mixes traditional social-science research methods with the use of media texts and arts-based approaches, including narrative, storytelling and metaphor, visual ethnography and the generation of 'live data' from participants, embracing that 'recognition of the visual and sensory nature of the world includes a widening of research methods to signal what counts as data and why' (Flewitt, Pahl & Smith, 2015, p. 2) Working in this way enables researchers to explore identity and how its perception is mediated by and with texts. Kedra (2018, p. 67) presents a framework of visual literacy competences, covering visual reading skills, visual writing skills, visual communication, visual creation, image production and image use and the broader categories of visual thinking and visual learning. This research explores image use and visual thinking, combining to generate new knowledge about mediated, visual *reflexivity,* in keeping with Kip Jones' characterization of social scientists as "collage-makers, narrators of narrations, dream weavers, natural allies of the arts and humanities" (Jones, 2006, p. 67).

Comrades (1986) tells the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, agricultural workers in Dorset who were arrested and transported to Australia in 1834 for swearing an 'illegal oath' and forming a union.

The film converges documentary realism with experimental narrative and aesthetics and the pivotal status of the magic lanternist in the text situates the film as in between pre-cinema and film media and between social history and imagined political transformations. Reading the film now, in the context of this research with the Martyrs Museum, its annual festival and the social history project housed in Shire Hall, Dorchester sets up a textual space between politics, film, art and physical objects. Magic lanterns in themselves are more significant than mere antiquity, rather they demonstrate "an inherent, but often overlooked imbrication of the technological and the literary, the visual and the textual" (Marsh, 2013, pp. 20-21).

Comrades took eight years to produce, during Margaret Thatcher's first decade as Prime Minister, in the context of the Miners' Strike and the defeat of the union. As Sheila Rowbotham's review of the re-issue retrospectively observed:

> The gulf between the rich and the poor structures the visual composition of the film. The worker in the field looks out at the carriage that passes in the distance; the camera moves to the scene from the carriage, showing the harvesters in the field so carefully positioned that they could be in a landscape painting. The inequality textured into Comrades suggests that people from differing classes are not quite real to one another…. what could be inferred and imagined by the viewer was to be as important as what was said. And what is said is so carefully controlled that we dwell on looking and, in looking, enter the rhythm of 1830s rural life. (Rowbotham, 2009, p. 1)

The themes this research explores with regard to visual literacy, identity, politics and history and the significance of *Comrades* as a 'stimulus' text for such lines of enquiry are set up helpfully in this interpretation:

Douglas' films are only political insofar as they are deeply personal. The Lanternist and the thirteen other roles Alex Norton plays in *Comrades* constantly insert curious and mesmerising objects of optical illusion into the narrative: the zoetrope, the magic lantern, the thaumatrope, the diorama and heliotypes (these items from Douglas' personal collection). Possibly greater than his love for cinema was Douglas' love for pre-cinema, a life-long passion he shared with friend and script editor Peter Jewell. Following Douglas' death, Jewell had the collection donated to the University of Exeter where The Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture was subsequently founded as both a museum and research centre, further affirming the filmmaker's legacy and contribution to moving-image history. (Judah, 2013, p. 1)

To explore this textual space, between the magic lanternist in *Comrades* mediating history and the beginnings of cinema and the museum curation of magic lanterns themselves in the director's collection, this research set out to explore how meaning-making around *Comrades*, magic lanterns, three museums and a film education network can facilitate new conversations about visual reflexivity as the textual mediation of history, politics and personal agency.

This research builds on previous work (Potter & McDougall, 2017) which makes a theoretical and research informed contribution, drawn from Cultural Studies, new literacy studies and educational research, to the 'conditions of possibility' for *dynamic* visual literacies, related to curational practices and a porous exchange of knowledge. In research practice, collecting data 'live' in visual mapping workshops, starts out from the hypothesis that social science research is richer when we get up close and personal to peoples' life narratives. Such 'creative methods', including visual literacy activities, work well / better for this and bring ethical tensions to the surface. Our everyday lives and our identities are mediated, but *we* make media meaning by putting texts to work in assemblages.

These kinds of visual methods can help us 'hear the noise' of everyday life (Pahl, 2014). Using media texts as an added stimulus for this relates to the affective or emotional mediation of our experiences in contemporary popular culture as a 'societal container' offering a therapeutic function (Richards, 2018), thus not only standing in for our ideas about our own experiences and situated practices but also holding us together, socially.

This way of thinking about dynamic visual literacies as agentive, social and situated practices rather than individual competences takes us beyond visual literacy as an extra / other to literacy and offers a sharp contrast with the static nature of the literacy of performative systems. Researching *dynamic* visual literacies means employing approaches to engage social actors as researchers of their lived experience. Related to this dynamic conception of (visual) literacy, curation is both an existing form of cultural production and a new visual literacy practice:

> I think questions about curation as an ongoing process are really useful ones: about how we curate ourselves and others, how we are curated and by who (and maybe what), and what happens with and around what we curate. I also like the way the concept of curation highlights aspects of people's media production that might otherwise go unnoticed. I like the way a focus on this process as one of curation helps us interrogate what's going on here, and foregrounds how personal resonance and experience gets explored and re-negotiated. (Burnett, C, in Potter and McDougall, 2017, p. 173)

Professional museum curation is thought through here as a formal, professional 'systemworld' manifestation of everyday curation as a visual literacy practice.

The Visual

Visual literacy and the over-arching 'dynamic literacy' share a desire to theorise relationships between elements of multimodel meaning-making (Gee, 2011; Ranciere, 2011; Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011). A museum exhibition is a combination of images, words and assemblage, with more or less optional 'extradiegetic' guiding elements.
Visual literacy is a complex social practice and as such models of universal competence are difficult to generate, a tension the field shares with media literacy (Chauvin, 2003). Meaning-making with multimodal combinations of text, image and design has been researched across disciplines including art, media and cultural studies, social literacies, critical theory and visual ethnography. Avgerinou and Pettersson's synthesis of the field presents a framework consisting of visual perception, language, learning, thinking and communication, whilst wrestling with the inherent tensions in such modelling, as, since the late 1960s, they observe:

> It is precisely due to this rich mélange of viewpoints that VL has preserved a dynamic profile. The interaction among divergent opinions, the challenge of an open-ended discourse concerning the nature as well as the practical expressions of the concept, the flexibility to acquire different standpoints in order to try their theoretical validity and viability within diverse settings, the activation and application of different research paradigms with the view to enlighten our understanding of what might constitute the concept, have kept the process of searching the theoretical basis as well as the raison d' être of VL so lively and intellectually stimulating. (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011, p. 3).

We read museum meaning in and as situated and discursive 'figured worlds' (Holland, 1988). Ranciere (2011) accounts for the presentation of photographs alongside, or in place of paintings in galleries within a broader theory of spectatorship, aesthetics and form:

> Photography came to embody an idea of the image as a unique reality resisting art and thought. And the pensiveness of the image became identified with a power of affecting that thwarted the calculations of thought and art. (Ranciere, 2011, p. 110)

Still and moving images from the past, in galleries curating political themes may provoke a tension between art and historical narrative. Ranciere argues that this tension is "already at the heart of the image" (2011, p. 117), as the images always bring into play two regimes of expression. Visual literacy, then, is about more than a set of competences. Rather, at its core is dynamic reflexivity, understanding how our ideas and identities are mediated in and between these regimes. For this project, the use of visual methods was also an ethical decision:

> Visual methods are not just a means of facilitating participation or empowering people as researchers; they are essentially intra-active in that the activity of being in research relationships, or being in relationship with research, creates (rather than merely records) the data. (Wood, 2015, p. 1350).

The ethical dimension is the pre-requisite to be open to uncertainty. The use of workshops with visual mapping is informed by visual ethnography and the desire for a blended practice across the interweaving of elements (archival work, interviews, the visual mapping) as a 'trace':

> When we think of workshops as having impact, this might not necessarily emerge in conventional or predictable forms, and might take time to gestate or become apparent… we propose thinking not of 'outputs' but but of how such work can continue its presence in a dynamic way that is open to further interpretation, meaning and practice over time. (Akama, Pink & Sumartojo, 2018, p. 129).

Pink (2013) emphasizes the locus of reflexivity between the researcher and the subject in visual methodologies and asserts "the premise that the purpose of analysis is not to translate 'visual evidence' into verbal knowledge, but to explore the relationship between visual and other knowledge" (p.96), therefore situating images in relation to the written word, other images, spoken words and other sounds without hierarchical privilege. Visual methods, then, provide rich *connecting* opportunities, (Potter & McDougall, 2017). Crucially, working with arts-based approaches situates production *as* research, arguing that the act of taking apart and putting back together locates the work in culture. For example, when using drawing as a research method, drawing is *combined* with talking or writing about meaning-making, capturing in language something from the drawing which initially evaded it (Theron et al., 2011). Sometimes personally 'therapeutic', sometimes community-facing, participants are enabled, through drawing, to identify issues and imagine solutions, rather than just answer questions. The same can be achieved with modelling (e.g. Lego Serious Play, Gauntlett, 2011) but when combined with participation, again, the outcome is to 'double-loop' new knowledge of the social world with its representation, both in the research and of it, for the outside world, but captured live, in the moment:

> Drawing as a participatory visual methodology offers researchers a rich entry point for engaging participants in issues that are important to them, for studying the act of representation itself, for reaching multiple audiences and ultimately, for social action. (Theron et al, 2011, p. 34).

Visual literacy is, however a site of tension in academia, perhaps due to "a residual legacy of Greek classical thinking which, rooted in oral tradition, privileged language and demoted the image as ephemeral. Forms of material making were then, and to an extent still are, accorded the lower status of mimicry or manual labour in the spectrum of cultural value." (Cannon, Potter & Burn, 2018, p. 187). This may be a Western paradox, however, as research from the field of media literacy in South Asian contexts suggests an openness to multimodal ways of working with mediation to align with reflective principles of Tao (awareness, realisation and spiritual vision), facilitating educational approaches to work with "visual imagery that reflects narrative, historical, ideological and cultural landscapes within our world" (Deng, 2018, p. 189).

The mapping exercise used here is developed out of an established method of using artefacts or objects as a stimulus for reflecting on identity and to try to get to richer, more personal 'data', with all the ethical issues that are so often hidden "below the line' in social science research" (Jones, p. 215). Visual literacy research of this kind seeks to bear witness to how "people borrow and curate what is of interest to them in

the 'cultural stock' and then 'mod' it and reflect their own interests and identifies (Cannon, 2018, p. 110).

For this identity mapping workshop participants select in advance their film text to bring to the activity: this must be a text providing them with metaphorical or abstract meanings – the focus here is on selecting a film which provides symbolic meaning about how they feel about themselves in relation to the knowledge domain to be explored. It is very important that the text is not a *direct* representation, instead if must convey (to the participant) a sense of the personal relationship between the person and the topic. Second, pairs of participants share their texts and explain their significance in relation to the theme. Whilst the other person is sharing, each participant should only listen, no notes can be taken. The structure for this is 'show and tell' – this might involve screening an extract, showing a visual artefact or handing over a physical DVD (or VHS, with older participants) and talking about it. The important aspect is to explain how it represents the person in relation to the topic and how they have actively interpreted it with regard to their identity – this is curation, a dynamic visual literacy practice.

After sharing and listening, pairs ask for clarification or more detail. Notes can be taken at this point. This stage is to clarify, to make sure when each participant disperses into other groups, they will not misrepresent the first conversation. However, this is about themes rather than individuals, so the teacher should reassure participants of this. Next, participants draw their 'maps' of one another. How the image is constructed is open and part of the experiment, but the focus is on visually locating person, text and topic in specific contexts. Flipchart paper is provided and the maps / are photographed, with informed consent. Next, depending on the group size, jigsawing is facilitated, the researcher gives each group a name or number and then asks participants to disperse and form new groups including one member of each of the previous groups. When the notes from the maps are shared, verbally, we are now two steps removed from the 'show and tell' and we are working to draw together key *shared* themes.

For this project, the jigsawing stage was included in the Radical Film Network workshop but now with the museum curators.

Comrades

When participants choose a film with political and historical meaning for them, often they share rich, deep and personal stories. For me, *Comrades* sits in a space between my own political views and trade unionism, some deeply personal things about my father's early death, my own working life and then the connection between all of those. My own map links *Comrades* to the Tolpuddle festival, my father's work as a Labour councilor and trade unionist, my current long commute and the identity navigation around my current role and the ironic privilege of a 'place in the country' in close proximity to the Martyrs' cottages.

Comrades is a filmic representation of the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs but its director was also fascinated with pre-cinema. The film's narrative is conveyed by the

character of a magic lanternist who re-appears throughout the text in fourteen personas, in each instance accompanied by a different optical device:

> Douglas' place in world cinema is guaranteed by the way he infuses social minutiae with imaginative light, with a keen eye for technical and artistic invention. In Comrades, his use of the cinema obscura and the diorama – his practical re-telling of the pre-cinematic development – serves as a metaphor for the martyrs' increasing perception of truth. Douglas knew, like William Blake, that poetical vision, the fine deployment of the imaginative eye, is akin to freedom, to a species of political emancipation. The lanternist's tale of the martyrs' arrest and deportation depends upon the notion of illumination, both technical and philosophical. (O'Hagan, 1993, pp. 208-9 and see also the director's own account and the actor, Alex Norton's recollections, Douglas, 1987).

It should be noted, however, that my own reading of the lanternist's narrative function as embodying and conveying transition – transformations of cinema and society – reproduces an orthodoxy that some see as reductive:

> Viewing the history of the projected image as being solely directed towards one entertainment media, albeit an important one with worldwide influence, tends to overlook its equal significance for (among other things) news, education, advertising, scientific research and technological development and religious, social and political propaganda, all of which are essential components of modern life. (Craylee, 2007, p. 78)

Fieldwork

On my visits to Douglas' archive, I spent time mainly with the objects, screenwriter Peter Jewell's research notes and the contextual archives – press cuttings, shooting scripts, financial records - but the research itself was focused on the the interplay of thinking about history of both cinema and of people and of collective activism (in Unions). The physical objects are also texts, so a magic lantern donated by Bill Douglas and a pamphlet about the Martyrs that Peter Jewell acquired in a shop in London are treated as 'data' in the same way. The lanternist is a narrative device to understand the hope (probably unrealized) for cinema to democratize representation 'for the people' and for the advent of trade unions. Unions and moving images are perceived as 'magic transformations' for the masses. The first trip to Exeter was devoted to exploring the collection and being with the artefacts. The second included interviewing curator Phil Wickham and Peter Jewell about historical and political narratives in both *Comrades* and Phil's curation. Following these visits, I interviewed Tom de Wit and Anna Bright, curators of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and Shire Hall Museums, respectively and then ran the fieldwork workshops at the Tolpuddle Festival with the Radical Film Network, and with the curators together at the Bill Douglas Museum. During these workshops, participants drew visual maps of each other's engagements with films, history and politics in the same way as I'm doing here with *Comrades*. Given the importance of presenting the recorded and photographed data from the fieldwork in the context of the curators' professional

roles, and where they work, informed consent was secured with no provision of anonymity.

The Lanternist is key in signaling *Comrades* as a cinematic illusion, providing a reflexive aesthetic motif, rather than a social realist text. In my time in the archives, working with the socio-materiality of the objects that Douglas had collected and donated and the research files for the film, I found myself in between the film, the lanterns (the 'thing power' of this non-human 'data' (Koro-Ljungberg, Loytonen & Tesar, 2017) and Bill Douglas as author, artist, collector, donor and researcher. In this way, the film, the curated collection, the history and politics and my own research were an assemblage of showing and telling and re-telling. Douglas was "trying to incorporate a simultaneous story about the pre-history of the cinema in all these references to lantern shows, the camera obscura, the diorama and so on" (Matthieson, 1986, p. 4) and I was trying to incorporate a simultaneous story about curation of identities into research into curation of museums and, from this, develop a method for the incorporation of visual literacy as reflexive curation of identity. It was also essential to spend time with the objects that Douglas and Jewell had collected, not because the research is *about* magic lanterns, but because it is concerned with the visual, mediated curation of identities as assemblages of texts, thoughts, memories and *things*.

Insert image here from archive – BDMC will provide, with permission to print

My additional archival research into the pre-production files spanned the producer's copy of *The Victims of Whiggery* (produced by the Communist Party), a TUC resource on the Martyrs' story (cited by the producer below), storyboards, a shooting script, optical effects planning sheets, notes on agricultural labour – "*Research Notes on Way of Life of Farm Workers*", *The Landworker* (newspaper of agricultural and allied workers); and an account in *Dorset Worthies*. An interview with Peter Jewell, creative collaborator and and Douglas' archival co-collector, reinforced this idea of the film as also an assemblage, of history, politics and aesthetics, in which the director's interest in pre-cinema aligned with an interest in telling the Martyrs story, as opposed to a political conviction. Having picked up the TUC account in a second-hand shop in Bournemouth, "I told Bill about the Tolpuddle Martys and he said – would it make a good film? All the characters go through transformation, as did Bill. I don't know whether we thought about that consciously. At a certain point in time, the thing takes over. The Tolpuddle Martyrs in the 1830s is roughly the same time, pre-cinema and social history were running parallel." However, our discussion acknowledged that the hope for transformation for society through, or aligned with this transition into visual literacy, remains unfulfilled.

Curators

The three curators were interviewed, about their formal curation practices at their museums, in particular how their curation re-tells the story of the Martyrs, *Comrades*, or aspects of either or both and how they understand the social practice of curating history. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and were conducted during 'walk-throughs' of the museums, so in places the transcriptions refer to specific rooms or exhibits. Following the interviews, they came together at the Exeter

museum to take part in a visual literacy exercise, mapping one another's identities as curators by starting out from media texts that 'stand in' for them.

Here, extracts from the interviews and images of their identity maps are presented and then discussed with regard to key discursive framings of their visual literacy practices. Phil, curator of the Bill Douglas Museum, chose *Comrades*. Anna (Shire Hall) shared *Shooting the Past* and Tom (Martyrs Museum) spoke about *The Third Man*.

The three curators are all experienced, but with different trajectories. Phil is an academic, teaching and writing about British moving image culture as well as curating the museum, which is located within the Exeter University campus. Anna trained as an Art historian and has worked in curational roles in The Tate, National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum before moving to a smaller gallery in Surrey and then onto the Dorchester project. Tom is the most explicitly political, his responses to the interview questions and personal narrative expressed in the mapping exercise often returned to themes of power and exploitation. Having come to his current role from the National Trust, his experience of the distinction between approaches to representing history is clearly marked and makes connections between various interlinked strands of this project unprompted, for example the hope for the medium of film as socially cohesive, collective activism and mass literacy as fundamental to holding power to account. On his own journey and this clear contrast between the storytelling contexts:

> *I've always been interested in stories and old stuff, which was what led me to heritage and museums, and that's inherently interesting without the politics so I can understand why someone would visit a National Trust house and not bother thinking of the politics of it. But my first job was as a pirate, so I've always had that aspect of challenging authority. With the National Trust, even now I still think their technical ability for conservation is unrivalled, but here what happened was achieved through protest and we can draw that out the Trust can't ever advocate that. There's no other interpretation of the aristocracy other than them being like gangsters or war lords, but that's the very thing they have to dilute by having Dr Lucy Worsley to walk around 18th century houses like it's a fun palace, dressing up thing and not the legacy of these people who were just absolutely reeking hell and havoc over the general population.*

All of the curators readily expressed their personal investment in their museums, described in each case as a project, and with a clear sense that personal perspective on the issues being curated (social justice, the collective power of film as a medium, political activism) were inseparable from the work. A common theme was the distinctive focus on the social – the 'people's history of the moving image'; 'human agency' in response to issues of law and social justice; the 'need' for people to know the story of the Martys. In the interviews, each curator reflected on the intersection between histories, politics and audiences. Museums are often described as 'third spaces', especially when used by education to connect the first space of home / community to the second space of school, as extra-curricular activity (Potter & McDougall, 2017; Bhabha, 1994; Guttierez, 2008). This was a more nuanced, complex mapping of spaces, however, between their first space personal histories and

the narrative / political curation of social history in the second space of the museum. So the films they spoke to and mapped through the visual literacy exercise function here as rich intersections between history and its secondary encoding in curation.

Here, the three curators offer specific examples of curational approaches:

> *I try to create a very basic over-arching narrative, that this is the people's history of cinema, as opposed to technology or machines, this is about how people have interacted with films. It's also how about how different ways of seeing culminating in the invention of cinema, and these ways of seeing are important in their own sense and how the sensation and wonder they each create are tied in with different aspects of social history, democratisation, urbanization, those kinds of things.*

> *There's a small number of people who are actually cross with what they see as the politicization of this piece of history. They want it to be much safer history, disarmed history, I guess in the way that you could look at a pirate story without it being a judgement on burglary and armed crime…. Or cowboy and Indian stories from the 1930s, you can watch without it seeming like a version of the sectarian violence we're now seeing in the Middle East.*

> *I think if we were in a different part of the country, we might have taken a different approach to how we tell the story. But on the other hand, I don't really care if you want to find out more about the Georgian architecture here, or whether you care about Tolpuddle, or if you're interested in a particular aspect of justice. What I do care about is that you come away with something. We're talking about lots of different areas of history, but the one thing I do hope comes across is the idea of how the law affects our society today and we can affect it today as well, so looking for history to get that across, that you have a voice and you have agency.*

Place images of the maps here (Exeter workshop)

The three maps produced in the workshop provide link to these extracts and some shared discursive framing of curational identities and practices. Objects telling stories, recovering the past and nostalgia as 'double edged' (my words) are linked to personal struggle (with education) or loss (bereavement) and politics articulated more as ethics – e.g. "how do we balance our feelings for people against their stated beliefs?" or "is it futile, when people are starving, sick or homeless?" (participants' words). Transition was a shared theme, connecting the curators' own pasts to the present, in some cases with reflections on social mobility, and also connecting history to the present as a political act of preservation – the curators seemed to share an anxiety about loss of cultural history or barriers to access and a conviction that museums are about visual literacy – the seeing of beauty in the everyday, nostalgia as a positive experience, the "ray of hope' and curation as a making visible, or facilitating ways of seeing connections. One map positioned the text (*The Third Man*) on the right, with the words 'Recovering the Past' placed in the centre and all arrows leading out and into this space. Another placed *Comrades* in the middle, with intersections between connections with own past, film crosses class, films connect us to …. curational practice, sense of place – in this case, film's role (more broadly) in other things is the

main motif on the map – so a visual 'meta' literacy around the activity is represented. *The Third Man,* on the other hand, is linked specifically to the curator's previous job in the role of a pirate, telling stories but struggling with the moral ambiguity of the need to present piracy as historically and politically neutral, very much in contrast with curating the Tolpuddle museum. *Shooting the Past* appears in the centre of the map, but with a line dividing the visual representation into two halves – the "ray of hope". On the left hand side are beauty, feeling inspired to tell stories, working to preserve culture, protecting culture, importance of art to human existence. Across the line we can see a crisis of faith, disillusionment, who cares / does it matter, what value does it have? An interesting aspect of the group reflection was a discussion about the curation of the telling and sharing by one curator seeking to offer an overly optimistic conclusion – the current museum role offering an opportunity for "what culture can achieve', which was questioned by the person represented in the drawing.

Asked to synthesise how their lives were mapped together by one another in the workshop, the three curators reflected on the difference between unstructured sharing of experiences, from the media texts 'standing in' and the more structured narratives in the maps – perhaps arising from the curational roles they inhabit. For example, frustrations with the drivers and contexts for curation had been depicted as leading towards work in a new museum as an answer – to questions about access to culture as a social service, when, instead "*it's more a case of the museum being a place where a thing is being tried*". The personal and professional interplay was, again, more neatly mapped than each participant had felt they had articulated it, but the maps played a role in 'joining the dots' and adding phrasing (moral ambiguity) that offered reflexive clarity as opposed to misrepresentation. The curators agreed on shared themes – curation as storytelling, access to culture - often framed in relation to social class - and the awareness of beauty in the everyday, curating social history as hopeful and optimistic, but also dialogic - "*making things available to people to enable them to make their own reflections on them*", again evoking the social practice of the reflexive visual literacy this research was looking for.

The same visual literacy 'mapping' activity was facilitated with the Radical Film Network at the 2017 Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival. The maps were photographed and the follow up group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

Place images of the maps here (Tolpuddle workshop)

Emerging themes from the maps and discussions included the mapping of personal identity to various articulations of 'radical' but as a signifier to be always attached to 'plugged into' (Harper & Savat, 2016) discourses of resistance to empire, power or oppression. So these film-maker / educators mapped their personal, professional and political identities to the chosen films and movements. The identity themes included childhood, resonance, counter-culture ("you can have any food as long as it's black"), freedom, struggle, 'torn apart', political awakening, the catholic church, power, abortion, festival). The chosen films were *Tras 0s Montes*; 1970s ethnographic cinema, *The Easy Life, Mean Streets, Voces Argentinas, Spirit of the Beehive, Die Welt, Our Daily Bread, Braveheart* and *A Room for Romeo Brass)*. The films chosen here, as with *Comrades*, were discussed as transition points, awakenings, empowering

texts, and the subsequent discussion hinged on a consensus that teaching with and about film is in itself a radical act, whether or not the films 'are' radical, because the visual literacy work is always already politically reflexive, so in this case the research activity – live data collection in a tent at the Tolpuddle festival - seemed to easily map to the participants' accounts of their pedagogy, and of film as pedagogic.

Running the same workshop with the Radical Film Network offered a point of triangulation with convenience sampling. Two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there is clear evidence here that using films as stimulus texts, combined with a paired drawing exercise can harness the affordances of creative / visual research methods in social sciences to provide a safe space for deeper identity work. Secondly, the presence of a shared theme – the 'back-story' of the Tolpuddle Martyrs for the curators, via *Comrade*s and also for the network, as the workshop was part of the TUC festival, must be accounted for and justified as part of the methodology. Therefore the extent to which the findings are generalizable can only be tentative or, rather, claims can be made for the research design (using film for mediated reflective visual literacy research) but not for the findings, as we were working here with such a highly situated participant group.

That stated, the following reflections were generated across the two groups:

1. The pedagogic practices of film education and museum curation are bound up in the personal histories and transition points of practitioners;

2. Both education and the curation of social history cannot be separated from experiences of struggle, loss and adversity and as such both domains of practice can never be separated from the personal and are never 'neutral'.

3. Participants in both workshops agreed, without exception, that this kind of 'data' could not have been generated by interviews alone and that this visual literacy activity facilitated a more *reflexive* space.

Findings and Discussion

Conclusions can be drawn from this research in two parts. The first is highly specific, deeply situated and context-bound, concerning film, history, politics and identity. The second is potentially broader, to do with the value of this approach for generating knowledge about reflexive visual literacy.

Comrades was used as a 'stimulus text' with museum curators whose sites are all connected to the history represented in the film and with film educators self-identifying as 'radical' and attending a festival marking the importance of that history for politics and social justice. The workshops and interviews, combined with the archival research, explored ideas about history, politics, knowledge and personal narratives with an interest, if not a methodological strand, in lanterns as 'thing-texts'. Physical locations (museums) were combined with ways of seeing and thinking about history and politics, through and with film, looking at four things. First, *Comrades* as a film. Second, the curation of the director's collection of magic lanterns and other optical artefacts at the museum in Exeter. Third, the role of the magic lanternist character in *Comrades* as pivotal to the representation of social history in the film. And

fourth, the curation of this social history in other museums in Tolpuddle and Dorchester (the Shire Hall living history project). As we visited the museum and read the materials in the collection, the research journey progressed from thinking about the lanternist as a narrative device to understanding the hope (probably unrealized) for cinema to democratize representation 'for the people' and the advent of trade unions as being impossible to re-create / curate neutrally. This research provided extra evidence for an ongoing hypothesis. When we ask people to choose a film with political and historical meaning for them and then think about similar connections, usually they come up with rich, deep and personal stories:

This casts a new light on how knowledge of history weaves together with other parts of our ways of being in the world, just as in previous research we have found peoples' experiences of education to be deeply personal, often to do with the interplay of struggle and hope and sometimes serendipitous. Crucially, for this article, these things are revealed in the research through a process of *reflexive* visual literacy.

In her recent proposal for a holistic visual literacy competence framework, specifically for the higher education context, Kedra (2018) suggests that the 'failed metaphor' of visual literacy is stretched furthest when it comes to visual interpretation in cultural contexts, or 'cultural image literacy':

> Regarding the object of interpretation, definitions specify visible actions, objects and symbols, and images, which are also described as culturally significant images (Felten, 2008), visuals and visual media that include mass media. The palette of visual objects that undergo visual interpretation is very broad and includes not only various kinds of still images, but also the so-called visible actions (Debes, 1969; Felten, 2008) that are not further explained. (Kedra, 2018, p. 73).

The findings of this research suggest that this notion of the 'learnable' ability to interpret images in cultural contexts, through exposure to visual meaning and, it is argued, educational encounters with extended forms of literacy learning, may be problematic. Such a way of thinking about visual literacy assumes the preservation of our ability to conceive of the separation between the image and the lived experience of the visually literate person reading it. Instead, or rather, *as well as*, it seems that we experience our reality, and re-interpret our life histories in ways which are 'always-already' mediated, so not only should we resist the primacy of oral and print literacy over the visual (as the visual literacy field has argued for decades) and over 'mass media' (likewise for the media literacy field), but also we should think again about the idea of visual mediation as representation of something before, or outside of it.

Bill Douglas, according to the received wisdom of the critical establishment, but also the curator of his collection and his script editor and lifelong friend, made *Comrades* a film about the purpose of the medium of cinema itself, as such a deeply reflexive text:

> While it represents a continuation of Douglas's interests in the rendering of truth through the image, it also explores very different, even contradictory questions of cinema as artifice and illusion. (Petrie, 1993, p.194).

The kinds of reflexive visual literacy articulated by the participants in this study present us with a similar paradox. On the one hand, these deeply personal accounts, enabled by filmic mediation, help the social scientist get closer to 'truth through the

image'. But at the same time, they raise challenging questions about the elusive and illusory nature of narrative 'data' itself. A cohesive theory of r*eflexive* visual literacy should set out happily to explore this conundrum, with the researcher as an itinerant lanternist.

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