ambiguous. I think the kinds of questions or misunderstandings that ambiguity provokes are due to our immediate unwillingness to accept or process it. Processing ambiguity means we need to step outside our comfort zone of conformity, convention and stereotype – we need to develop patience for reflection and a capacity for deep analysis. And, we need to no longer be afraid of doubt.

We have to learn to balance confidently on the tightrope and develop the reflexes to change colour like the chameleon. Then we can confidently utilise the characteristics of ambiguity to cast doubt within ourselves and others with intelligence and sincerity. Where there is doubt, there is space for self-innovation and for stimulating the imaginations of others.

Notes
3. Ibid.
WR:
Ambiguity for me is about non-fixity of meaning. And in my work – certainly the work I was doing in the 1990s, up to 2010 – my films construct meaning by image and sound alone. Without voice or text as the primary agent. About Now MMX (my last work produced on 35mm film [2010]) is a good example. There is no text at all, except for a few words on advertising hoardings and anti-capitalist slogans that appear within two shots. Working with ambiguity, for me, is less of an aesthetic choice and more of an ethical, perhaps even a philosophical imperative. That’s because it’s anti-didactic, and empowers the spectator to exercise agency in the construction of meaning. It’s about having open texts, as opposed to closed texts. Film communicates through the senses – constructs an embodied experience that is to do with both thinking and feeling.

PR:
Ambiguity, for me, has a very significant function – not just in helping me explore the vector and direction of a film work, but also in informing the way that one conducts oneself throughout that process. What I mean is that film is a kind of dance through which a visual idea comes into focus and then dissolves into, sometimes disparate, associations. The image I have in mind is sort of like an hourglass, with the place where the hourglass goes wide standing for the function and role of ambiguity. Ambiguity can draw me away from fixity, or certainty that I know the way that life plays out for the key ideas or people who are typically the subjects of my documentaries. It can arrest the imposition of my worldview on the ‘other’. Ambiguity has a very useful strategic role – it can help interrupt, disrupt, some of the meta-narrative that can prevent me from seeing the person I’m working with in something more like their own terms, with their own history, identity and way of seeing the world. At the same time, that function of ambiguity in forcing interruption, and taking apart preconceptions, means that one’s practise and the filmmaking process will have to be more finely attuned to the ‘crucial moment’ – the point where the hourglass narrows – in order to find coherence and focus. So, for me, there’s a dance, if you like, between opening the windows, casting the net of interpretation wide – moving towards the wideness of the hourglass – and then, once that’s integrated and understood, moving into a period of disambiguity, or of making clear that which has become apparent. When you’re filming, you ask yourself, where are the ruthless edges of my frame, of both the image and narrative? Those are very distinct and clear decisions that one has to make continually. Makers who I admire manage to elucidate a vision embedded in their subjects’ experience yet still manage to encode a range of readings in their final film.

SAM:
I’m going to talk more as a screenwriter than anything else, in response to both of your definitions. Because I think that the scriptwriting process is the bedded-down mulch, if you will, of what will eventually become the finished film! I’m at a strange moment, where I’ve written a dozen scripts. And, as is the case for many screenwriters, nothing has been made yet. So I exist, as a screenwriter, in a very ambiguous place of not having seen the final frame or the embodiment of a character in an actor and their performance. It’s almost like being in the amniotic fluid of one’s creative process. I find it a bit terrifying sometimes, handing over my work to the director.
WR:
Is that to do with relinquishing control?

SAM:
It is. To relinquish control is obviously a liberating thing in itself, but I find that the power dynamic is very tricky. I frequently end up in very long mid-wifing relationships with directors.

PR:
I used to work as a script editor for BBC One, particularly with new or young writers navigating that path. So I appreciate what you mean about that process, and it reveals the double-edged nature of ambiguity. The beauty of ambiguity is to hold us open to different kinds of reading, to suggest that life is different to how we might imagine it. The more treacherous side, or the side that can threaten an integrity of practice, is where ambiguity becomes a kind of excuse not to know more deeply, an excuse not to come to make a difficult decision or commitment to pursue a central meaning as it unfolds in relation to the other.

A phrase resonates here in relation to my recent film, Justine (2013, see opposite) – a phrase that I was given by Kate Adams and we used in the book connected to it: ‘the art of not knowing’.

This film is a portrait of a young woman, a wonderful woman called Justine, with what’s called Advanced Neurological Disorder. She barely speaks. And, unlike William, I use words and interview material quite a bit ...

WR:
Well, my three most recent films are wordy. The Houseless Shadow (2011, see overleaf) voices the Charles Dickens essay ‘Night Walks’ [1861] on the soundtrack, though it was my intention that the images would have the primary function of revealing that, in terms of homelessness, nothing has fundamentally changed in London over the last 150 years. But for sure, I do strive for verbal economy.

PR:
Yes, and my recent films have used far fewer! But, you know, with words, there’s the attraction of thinking that one can fix a particular meaning. But that can be a mirage, an illusion – it’s not the whole truth. So, coming back to Justine, I’m working with somebody who barely speaks, and many of the ways in which one would usually talk about a subject’s consent, even informed consent, in documentary practice are not relevant.

The filming situation completely rested in the potential of ambiguity – the beauty of ambiguity – on being able to step into a space where what I thought I might do could be interrupted by trying to intuit how it might have been experienced by another. In this case, it was about exploring the language of gesture, of intuition, of inference and feeling. And ultimately, it’s beyond text and it’s beyond words.

I have found it important to develop a methodology in film practice that can acknowledge this realm of ‘not knowing’ – a place of doubt. But I also see a potential danger in ambiguity, where it’s a get-out from making the most difficult artistic decisions, about how a work finds form.

SAM:
It’s also dangerous in terms of that ambiguous space that you’re talking about – getting to it with your subjects. Are you ever, in your work, concerned about that final ‘ruthless’ frame being a projection of your own concerns?

PR:
Yes, and I think that if you’re not open to that possibility, then that’s more...
dangerous than if you’re not worried! But I think a conversation like this, if it comes from a place of honesty, can help. And I should say, I don’t mean ‘ruthless’ in the sense that it means the imposition of a director’s or camera-person’s view of things, ruthlessly imposing one’s view over the sensibility of another. I mean ruthless in recognising that edges of a frame mark borders of exclusion; choices that are at the heart of directing.

WR: I want to open this up and pick up on an earlier point that Pratap made, which is to do with the slipperiness of words. There’s a wonderful quote from Hermann Hesse, the German writer, which articulates this very well:

> Words do not express thought very well. They always become a little different immediately they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish. And yet it also pleases me and seems right that what is of value and wisdom to one man seems nonsense to another.²

And I think in that last point, that what is of value and wisdom to one mind may seem nonsense to another, is a terrific comment on the ambiguity of text, ambiguity of language. I am interested in how ambiguity informs my process, and I think it’s very much at the level of process that it does so, and certainly with no deliberate intention to obfuscate meaning.

PR: Is there a sense in which ambiguity serves the bigger exploration going on in your writing or film?

WR: I think there’s a lovely contrast between what I think I might be doing, and what I find that I have done when I look at the shot in the edit. And I may have gone out with a very specific intention – to get a particular shot, with its own dynamics, and conveying one particular meaning. And then I look at it in the edit, and actually, it’s telling something quite other than intended.

SAM: I wonder if the process is any different … You were saying you shoot on film?

WR: I used to shoot on film.

SAM: No longer?

WR: Up until six years ago.

SAM: That immediacy of seeing something on a monitor or on a little LCD screen, in digital filmmaking, is very different to only seeing what you’ve got post-development. So I’m curious for both of your takes on that moment: the alchemy that happens inside the camera and the alchemy that happens in the edit being very different things.

WR: [Soviet director and film-theorist] Dziga Vertov writes about this brilliantly. He talks about the different levels of editing. There’re six different stages of editing he identifies: from the first observation of something, to the editing in the camera – the shooting of it – and then, of course, the extended levels of editing during post-production.

PR: Of course, that’s forgetting the series of drafts and edits that began even before filming, too.

SAM: Of course, that’s forgetting the series of drafts and edits that began even before filming, too.

PR: There is definitely something about that digital technology that’s affected how I work. In the first six years I was typically shooting on 16mm film – or sometimes Super 16 – and you wouldn’t fully know what you’d got …

WR: That was the beauty of analogue film – the latency of the image.

PR: Yes. You might be a month on location, maybe somewhere a very long way away; you might get reports or occasionally see some rush prints, but that was more to do with technical considerations – just checking that things were at the correct exposure, etc. Whereas now, if you’re really not sure about things, in a break or if you feel it necessary at the time, you can go back and check and re-listen. You can even, if appropriate, involve your contributors in that process. That is tricky and interesting territory … I think it just shifts the ambiguity to somewhere else, though. I don’t feel that it’s heralded ‘the arrival of certainty’. WR: That touches on what you were saying about research ethics. Being able to show your participants the shots you’ve just taken gives them some agency
in or control over how they're being represented on film.

SAM:
Or how to represent themselves in the next take?

PR:
Yes, it may do that. For some people it can make them seize up with self-consciousness; for others, it can build their confidence. But I think there's an important editorial step between sharing what you've shot, as distinct from allowing the other a chance to say, actually, no, I don't like that – can I say something different instead? Or, can you get my good side?

There was a particular stage in making Justine that threw this up for me. We had made a rough cut of the film – edited by a very talented young filmmaker, Esperanza Jiménez – and took it to show Justine and her family. We had a wonderful interaction with the family, which we recorded as well. At the end of it, the family said, yes, that's good, but we want to say something now. And I'd thought of this as a nearly wordless film – Justine's film. The one thing I didn't want was people speaking on her behalf! And then I thought more about it and realised, well, it's their film, too, and if they're saying that they need to express things in order to help people understand their experience of being Justine's family – and they had their own agenda of agitating, quite rightly, for more support – I thought, well, who am I to stand in the way of that? Yes, it's completely different to what I'd imagined, but let's do that. It's a strange film, in a sense, because there's no one talking about Justine in interview through the main body of the narrative. However, you hear the ambient, synchronous sound, so the audience has quite an immersive experience of being in Justine's world, where at times people do talk about her, without necessarily speaking directly to her. Then in the final sequence we have a moment where a series of hard-cut interviews offer insights into how her family experiences life with her, which repositions the whole thing.

SAM:
I have two questions for you. Firstly, I find it quite, perhaps disturbing isn't the right slippery word …

PR:
Troubling?

SAM:
Troubling. Mother-daughter relationships are eternally ambiguous, so a situation where the mother takes agency to speak for her daughter is, I guess, troubling? But then, my question to you is, where does your responsibility lie? Towards the subject, or towards the work?

PR:
Yes, that's a great question. I've tried in the past to write about this question of which gods we're following: the god of artistic expression? The god of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics? It's hard to weigh competing responsibilities, and I'm not sure how fruitful it would be to try and answer in the abstract, but it makes sense in specific filming conditions. I was making some documentary work in the aftermath of an outrage, a series of murders designed to spread terror, and I ended up writing about it in a chapter called 'Are you a vulture?', which was asking documentary practitioners what on earth we think we're doing – making our work, our practice, from the suffering of others. And it wasn't an argument that we shouldn't make work that responds to suffering, but that we should be 'decently troubled' by the attempt: that our practice should live in the tension between the two positions that you're rightly pushing me to show how I make decisions about. Yes, one's artistic practice has to be alive, in order for it to have a chance of communicating something of value, but, at the same time, no film is created, made or exhibited outside of a historical or political context. And these decisions are resolved, if resolved is the right word, in the truthful, inventive process of discovering what unfolds in the cutting room. Just to go back to the discussion of editing: there's a wonderful moment – a crucial moment, anyway, for me – where I hand over the rushes to an editor and sometimes I don't really say much. Obviously, you pick who you work with very carefully, and I might even invite the editor to location or to meet some of the people in the film, but I'm interested in how an editor – someone with perhaps a different gradient of looking, or sensibility to mine – might see the rushes that I bring back, so I try not to tell them how I want it to be in any really specific way, at least initially. It's another moment where you can cast the net wide and see what can emerge.

SAM:
Collaboration, in terms of what I do, is often very painful though. The number of voices one has in one's own head while writing something can be very dangerous for the final product. It's certainly the case with things like workshops. I went to the Sundance Screenwriting Lab last year, for example, with a screenplay of my own to direct – we'd already shot a load of documentary footage of the Eid el-Adha slaughter in Cairo. And in the end, having ten extra voices, after having years of too many finance and producer voices (it was my rookie error), I feel I didn't perform my responsibility to the work by protecting it from this cacophony. Film, essentially, is at a certain scale and the scale at which I wanted to achieve that project was necessarily going to have to be collaborative, so I falsely believed that to allow more voices would only make it better. It was an important lesson to learn.

WR:
I feel that there's a kind of balance to be struck. A lot of my work is, of its very nature, documentary, in that I don't go into studios to create my shots. There's definitely a documentary aspect to what I'm doing – I am more interested in what is happening out there on the street. And I try and do as much as I can by myself, because that's the way I've always worked; for me, it's very important that I shoot the images and, as far as possible, edit the images myself as well. I'm not sure it would be productive to hand over the picture to an editor. I do rely on David Cunningham to process all the sound and produce the soundtrack – I have done, for the last 20 years or so. The luxury that I demand when I'm making something is time. Particularly in the edit. The twelve-minute film A 13 that I made in 1994 took me fifteen months to make, and that was all time in the edit, figuring it out. And it went through many different transitions and changes over the course of shooting, and editing on a Steenbeck [flatbed film-editing table].

SAM:
How delicious.

WR:
Well, it's delicious up to a certain point, but it does make radical changes quite difficult. You've got to have a system. You've got to be very well organised and know where all your shots are, to start with. Then, if you're going to break it up – what you've edited, what you've spent two weeks working on – you've got to put
roles. It’s all in one room. I do all of my work – I write my screenplays, I make my video art – on the same device. And that can actually become claustrophobic. The fact that there is constant background radiation and noise, more than anything is very detrimental to the creative process.

WR:
Yes, I agree totally with that.

SAM:
That might seem very old-fashioned of me, but I do feel that way.

PR:
I think it’s increasingly becoming an issue. Because at the moment there are lots of people who were trained and developed a kind of, I’m going to say depth, though that’s not to say that others lack depth. In the analogue world, though, we weren’t dealing with that same level of distraction, and the requirement to respond to things, which certainly has a tendency, for me at least, to bring me more to the surface, rather than back to where the practice might be. To go back to the opportunity and the danger of ambiguity; for me lately, if something is uncomfortable in my perception or for my particular value system, then that opens a door in my practice.

WR:
Yes, it’s also about sharing that not-knowingness with your audience, with the spectator who watches that film. I’m not interested at all in making work that’s entertaining.

PR:
But your work is entertaining. I don’t think it would reach people if it didn’t have that aspect?

WR:
Oh dear! I would hope it’s engaging rather than entertaining, as such. I think you can, in the way you frame a shot, for example, you can put something visually interesting on the screen. And you can do things with sound that are engaging. I try never to work with sync sound, for example. I find that sync sound kills the screen experience dead for me, and I always like to have a pull-push relationship between what the image is doing and what the sound is doing. It opens the possibility of a new, more total, space.

SAM:
It’s very generous, because it gives the audience space to fill that gap, between sound and image. At least, that’s my experience of seeing things that are unsynced.

PR:
That’s interesting, because I always shoot sync sound. I might not use the sound synchronously, or at all, in the final edit, but it’s very important to me that the sound world has a relationship to location and the filming moment and that I have that option to work in sync with every frame. I agree with William, that being able to think about the sound world in a way that’s not literal is important. But for me, the answer isn’t to walk away from synchronicity; I want diegetic sound to remain a tool in the toolbox?

WR:
I would distinguish between literalism and illustration. So, if the soundtrack’s telling me what I can see in a picture, I become instantly bored. The counter to illustration is evocation, and that’s what

---

Sophia al-Maria, draft scripts for unmade film Beretta, with ‘a Tarot reading my friend Fatima did for me which gave me the clarity to stop’, installed as part of Sophia Al-Maria: Virgin with a Memory, Home Gallery, Manchester, 6 September – 2 November 2014
I want a film to do – I want the screen experience to evoke something for me through the sum of its elements.

PR:
That is very beautifully put. I mean, even worse than what you describe is the soundtrack telling you what is happening in the shot. There’s quite a lot of film practice where, in addition to the location sound, and what you’re seeing there, you’ve then got someone telling you what to think. It’s the kind of ‘voice of god’ that became identified, slightly unfairly, with the work of [early Scottish documentary maker] John Grierson. The Grierson stable was much broader than that.

WR:
It’s a discussion rehearsed in film theory and criticism. [American film critic] Bill Nichols is more of the opinion, I think, that documentary is there to inform. Whereas, I think that [ethnographic filmmaker] Toni de Bromhead argues that it’s more about giving visual pleasure.

PR:
Exploring the source and definition of aesthetics leads back to the realisation, from my perspective at least, that the integration of ethics and aesthetics is primary. If ethics are stripped away from aesthetics, then aesthetics becomes merely a conversation that hovers somewhere ‘above’ history and cultural politics – a parlour game about naming, say, the fifty great painters back to the Renaissance. This effacement of context tries to situate the artwork as though it somehow doesn’t have a relationship to politics, society and the relationships out of which the work emerged and is made and seen. There was a big movement in cultural history – post-Edward Said, particularly – which insists on this reconnection. Ambiguity can then be a strategic way to insist on a broader range of connections, which can be read out from the artwork and which reveal context. A way of saying, no, the work – the film, the script, the sculpture, whatever it is we’re doing – exists and intervenes in culture and history. It’s not just superficial or a kind of wallpaper or a parade of celebrity artists primarily to be read in relation to each other.

WR:
I’ve always taken great exception to close textual analysis because it mitigates against ambiguity. And it’s something that has informed a certain approach to film theory. Because, whatever the discipline, close textual analysis is based on the notion that a text cannot speak for itself, that its meaning is not self-evident on its face. It runs quite opposite to the view I’ve always taken, which is that an artwork can never be fully interpreted but can only be experienced. Close textual analysis, for me, tends to eliminate ambiguities of meaning. William Empson does say in his book of literary criticism, Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), that ambiguity is used by writers as a means of engaging the readership. There’s enjoyment to be derived from ambiguity in writing.

PR:
But I think close textual analysis is very important if it’s done well, because it insists on the individual’s experience of that work. When it’s working well, I don’t think that narrows down the work, but shines a different light on it. For example, for centuries, literary critics only really talked about Shakespeare’s Othello, say, in terms of personal jealousy – the green-eyed monster – or about The Tempest in terms of the magic and release towards the end of Shakespeare’s life. But look closely at those works and encoded in the language of Othello, for example, are the specific racial dynamics of what was happening in Venice in that period. The Tempest, likewise, encodes the dynamics of imperialism in a particular historical, colonial moment. I’m talking in very broad brushstrokes, but those debates were suppressed or not visible to the literary establishment for most of the history of these plays, even though Shakespeare’s language insists on their centrality. Close reading attends to Caliban’s desperate calls for restitution. So I think close reading can release all of this and more, as long as it doesn’t think that somehow the critic is bigger than the work or that he or she is able to nail it down or reduce the slippages of meaning into one sole reading.

WR:
Just linking this back to ambiguity, it seems to me that ambiguity acknowledges the fact that we all see the world differently. I think, in terms of art education, those differences in ways of seeing have to be nurtured in our students. This becomes more of an imperative given the increasing cultural diversity among them.

PR:
Yes, and the potential value of close reading is that it insists on returning the individual to their experience of the artwork. That has to be central – it can’t just be our preconceived or favourite ideas just rehearsed on a new artwork. The artwork is a place where...
PR: But I think, whatever position one takes on this, one of the useful things about ambiguity is that it helps us juxtapose these competing readings. We need a conversation that is mature enough to hold different aspects of a work or an individual or a historical moment in consideration. That's central to pedagogy, as well – after this, I'm going to a class and there'll be people from all over the planet there, who've got very different takes on what happens, and we need to be able to be in relation to each other – to learn from each other - as we seek to surface a range of views that an artwork can stimulate, through its ability to embody multiple readings. Being alive to ambiguity is a conceptual key to help us embrace pluralism and encourage it to crystallise.

SAM: They've just removed that statue at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. I was having a conversation with some students at UCT who were involved in the protests going on there, and they certainly saw it as a great triumph, that it had been taken down. But I found that erasure – although it's an important symbolic act – it's also a certain erasure of history that can be extremely dangerous. One of the arguments that was posed by one of the individuals I was talking to was that not being shackled to history was the only way to forge ahead into their future. And this is very young people speaking.

Notes