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Prisons Memory Archive: Armagh Stories

I would like to begin with a quote from Elizabeth Jelin, an Argentinian writer who commented:

> We live in a time when traditions are subject to multiple forms of critical scrutiny, when hierarchical paradigms based on canonical knowledge are undergoing profound transformations, and in which a plurality of new subjects are demanding their place within the public sphere. In this context, the transmission of the knowledge and meanings of the past becomes an open and public issue, subject to strategic struggles and controversies about the 'politics of memory'. (Jelin, 95)

The Prisons Memory Archive is a collection of filmed recordings of the memories of 175 people who worked in, were imprisoned in, or visited the prisons, which were used to hold prisoners during the political conflict in the North of Ireland from the 1970 to 2000. We brought people back to the prison site of Armagh Gaol and the Maze and Long Kesh Prison, filming walk-and-talk interviews. Relatively, for example compared to Guatemala, there was a small level of violence, but it was significant for a European parliamentary democracy. The prisons were seen as iconic – as touchstone and tinderbox – influencing outside politics and outside politics influencing what happened inside the prison walls. If we could tell the story of the prisons through documentary film, we could tell one of the most important stories from what become known as the Troubles.

As a result of the ceasefires of the 1990s, followed by the Belfast Agreement of 1998, prisoners were released by 2000 and some of the prisons closed. Prisoners were a crucial constituency in the decisions to agree the ceasefires and accept the 1998 Agreement.

After several years of negotiations with the Northern Ireland Office and, later, the Office of First and Deputy First Minister of the Stormont Assembly, followed by negotiations with ex-prison staff and ex-prisoner groups, we filmed over the summers of 2006 (Armagh) and 2007 (Maze and Long Kesh).

Protocols

There are three main protocols that we use in the PMA – collaboration, inclusivity and life-story telling.

The first, and from which the others evolved, is a collaborative approach where we work closely with the participants and underpin our commitment by agreeing co-ownership of the material with them. Since they have a veto over their own material, this entails an enormous risk that they might pull out towards the end of the process. This ethical approach has two purposes:

1. It allows participants to be authors of their own stories, an important aspect of the healing process for anyone who has undergone a traumatic experience;
2. It eases accessibility. Given the ongoing sensitivities around our political conflict – including contestation over whose stories are privileged – we were informed by several participants that they cooperated only on the basis that it was not intended for television and that they would have control over its use.

A second protocol is inclusivity with as full a range as possible of participants, many of whose stories conflict in terms of experience and interpretation. One way of gauging a society's ability to mature is to measure how it is able to listen to the stories of the 'other', the stories of those whom you had been in conflict with. So we are asking audiences to experience stories that contradict each other and maybe challenge their own perceptions.

The third protocol is the use of the life-story approach to oral history and to rely on the materiality of the sites to stimulate memory recollection. While we engaged in conversations with the participants, this was to clarify and tease out what they had expressed in a briefing session the areas they wished to cover. There was no list of set questions. Selma Leydesdorff et al. explain, life-story telling 'allows room for contradiction, a holistic richness and complexity. It gives the opportunity to explore the relations between personal and collective experience, by focusing on remembering and forgetting as cultural processes'. (Leydesdorf et. al.,12).

Methodology

We established a consistent methodology to our work, so that all participants were treated equally in terms of life-story telling with no leading questions. We aimed for the highest affordable production standards, using HD cameras and professional camera operators. We also aimed for the highest standard of sensitivity in dealing with traumatic experiences. One precaution that we took was to offer trauma therapy for each participant and also provided a half-day counselling session for all crew before filming in order to address the transference of trauma. We provided a fifteen-minute briefing before and after each recording session for the participant to understand what the purposes were and to offer opportunities to reflect on the recording act. All recordings have been sent to the participants to agree to. Some have asked for small deletions, usually where others' names are mentioned. Most have agreed to let them stand as they are, with a small number requesting a moratorium on the date of public release.

Armagh Gaol

Armagh Gaol was a Victorian Gaol, which was used historically to hold primarily women prisoners, but often with a male contingent, which addressed the overspill from other prisons. After the Troubles erupted, the gaol's capacity could not cope and extra temporary accommodation was built to house, firstly,

internees and, later, convicted prisoners. The prison closed in 1986, when prisoners were moved to the newly built Maghaberry Prison, which continues to hold both men and women in separate areas, including those recently convicted of activities on behalf of dissident republican and loyalist armed groups.

In the three examples I show, we see the Prison Officer introduce us to the circle, the control area at the centre of the wings. She checks that the camera operator has not covered this aspect of the prison and then continues to describe balancing a young family with her unsocial working hours. Next, we see an ex-prisoner take us to her old cell ('Its so small', she declares) and describe what life was like for a loyalist prisoner in a predominantly republican wing. Finally, we see and hear a republican ex-prisoner describe caring for a newborn inside the prison. One of the interesting aspects of these recordings is how the participants co-direct by taking the initiative in where to film and what to say and when to say it.

Impact

The significance of the work is the most difficult to measure. The work is personal, sensitive, political and contested. We have tested out its impact by taking to a variety of groups. We have some of this material on our website (www.prisonsmemoryarchive.com) and have also edited six excerpts for screening at discussion events in Ireland and the UK, including London, Monaghan, Armagh, Roslea and Belfast, with various constituencies, from security personnel, to teenagers to women's groups. PhD student, Jolene Mairs curated an exhibition and workshops at Belfast Exposed and has collated questionnaires and conducted interviews. The response has been insightful. While criticism of what a particular person has said has been voiced, there is universal agreement that all voices need to be heard.

To cite one example: at Armagh Local History Library, where 78 people turned up (mostly middle-aged women), one woman's response was that the prison officer's story had helped her identify with the officer as a young mother raising children, although the respondent herself came from a nationalist background. It 'humanised her', she said.

Interactive Documentary

Our hope is to create an interactive documentary, where users are able to negotiate their own pathway through the material, retaining some editorial control, e.g. constructing their own narrative. One example might be to choose the word, 'Relationship'; options would appear, including, say, 'Parenting'. If this was chosen, then a selection of interviews would appear which might start with the prison officer talking about rearing a young family, followed by a prisoner describing raising a baby in prison. In this way, the user is both choosing and being exposed to filmed excerpts, which offer an overall narrative that combines unlikely connections.

By offering our society the opportunity to hear and see stories of all its members, including those with whom we do not agree, we hope that the archive will make transparent and manageable the struggles over what Jelin calls the 'politics of memory'.

Works Cited

Jelin, Elizabeth, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2003).
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