Visual Organisational Ethnography

(VOE) is an eclectic approach that draws on history as well as present day testimony to deliver evidentially rich and emotionally powerful depictions of organisational cultural dynamics as resources for new directions.

Award-wining film *Black Snow* (about the creation of a memorial to a 19th century mining disaster) and multimedia exhibition *The Rhythm of the Martyrs* (about 'Peace Walls' dividing Belfast Catholic and Protestant communities) are examples of the method at work.

Drawing *on* the culture of a community, drawing *in* a wide range of materials, drawing *out* of these a work of art - the graceful **Portuguese Man O'War** (PMoW) is the perfect metaphor for the processes of the VOE.

3 The Many in the One

Whilst it looks like a glorious unit, it is actually a community of four organisms living together.

VOE not only reveals the technical and emotional complexity of everyday life, it also embodies that complexity – its own unity is the result of many inputs, practices, skills, ideas, experiences and resources.

1 The Extraordinary Ordinary

The Portuguese Man O'War is a relatively small and unassuming creature – if found on a beach it would be five or six inches long. But encountered at sea, it aspirates, it is inspired – it not only appears much bigger, inflated, but it is beautifully coloured, delicate, translucent and shaped like a warship in full sail.

A film or other output of **VOE**'s empirical art, similarly draws us in by its voluptuous surface crafted from what often seems dull and ordinary.

4 The Deep Core

It has a strong core stem which is how it remains both stable and safe whilst being mobile and adaptive, as this is where nutrition and reproduction occur.

The art of **VOE** is to express and convey the deeper, perhaps darker, heart and continuities within cultures, despite diverse facets and dazzlingly different reflections.

2 Blown by the Wind

The PMoW travels by using the wind, which means it has to turn itself into a sail by self-inflation and deflation. It needs to be able to respond to changes in its environment quickly or risk being blown away or swamped.

The **VOE** is likewise highly responsive to its environment, featuring constant improvisation and innovation to make the best of the opportunities serendipity offers.

6 The Lasting Sting

It carries a sting that is immediate and powerful, and can stop you in mid-stroke. But even the tiniest fragmented remains left on the beach can sting weeks after the creature has moved on. It leaves its mark.

The powerful emotional affects and images of **VOE** stay with its audiences, energising and inspiring new action and change.

5 Myriad Filaments

It has hundreds of filaments. Some are very fine, flimsy and difficult to see, while others are bigger. These extend around it in all directions, and below, for as much as 50 metres.

VOE traces the extensive roots and connections, the invisible embeddedness of how things appear in their context and history.

UNIVERSITY of York

Aspect

1. The Extraordinary Ordinary
VOE is more than it appears

Black Snow People often do extraordinary things in their everyday lives that they take for granted, or in the archives overlook important evidence that those things were done. Film draws us in to reveal hidden secrets. In 1861 the Oaks Colliery in Barnsley was the site of the world's worst industrial explosion. Although it was soon forgotten at the time there were great examples of heroism and of other workers generosity towards the hundreds of women and children left destitute. The National Union of Mineworkers Miners Hall, under construction at the time, keeps records and artefacts from the Union's history and in one of the storage rooms the Executive officer found and old metal trunk. On closer examination it turned out to be the original box that had been used to collect and store the many donations nationwide to the disaster relief fund. It made a fine symbol of community generosity. We also found in the archives the accounts of the union, prepared for bi-weekly meetings, showing the subscriptions paid. At one turn of a page, without comment, the Oaks subscriptions became zero.

The Rhythm of the Martyrs In our background research for our photographic exhibition on peace walls and murals dividing communities in Belfast, we had seen a great deal of footage, and many images, of houses and flats close to the dividing walls. Most of them were several years old, often showing petrol bombs and rocks being thrown. But when we visited Clonard Street where the houses had been burnt to the ground and rebuilt, the back yards were caged in, and there was a memorial garden at the end of the terrace, we were staggered by the way that everyday life had just adapted and worked around all this – and the child's space hopper provided a brilliant punctum.

Image: Living close to the wall © Bryan Ledgard

2. Blown By The Wind
VOE is responsive, improvised and innovative

Black Snow One of the problems we had in filming *Black Snow* was that the bronze memorial, whose story we were trying to tell, was at the foundry being cast, and we could not get any footage of it. However, the volunteers had a full-size fibreglass version that they stored in the Miners' Hall outbuildings and used for promotional purposes and they brought it up to the hall for use to see. They moved it on a small wheeled crate. Producer Andy Lawrence was able to make some ingenious adaptations so that the crate could support a tripod, and run smoothly, and set up a lighting rig so that we could get so 360°pan around footage. The result was a powerful effect that normally would have had to be obtained by the hire of a professional rig at a cost of several thousand pounds!

Image: Circling the Statue © Stephen Linstead

The Rhythm of the Martyrs Being open to and able to respond to the environment means being ready for moments that might otherwise slip by. Here Bryan Ledgard was about to cross Belfast's Catholic Falls Road when he realised that the two young boys were wearing the same colours as Republican heroine Countess Markiewicz on the poster. He managed to catch them at that exact moment they drew level with her, providing an instant juxtaposition of history in school and history in the street, and what that might signify in a city where versions of history were very much contested.

Image: Two Little Boys © Bryan Ledgard

3. The Many in the One
VOE embodies complexity

Black Snow Many people made small contributions to the overall effect of the film. In this image we see what was the historic NUM Boardroom, with its tables moved back and converted into a makeshift studio for carrying out interviews. One of the people in the picture, the caretaker of the building had, with some difficulty, extricated the valuable banner from display in the main hall and brought it up to use as a backdrop. Two of the group are an ex-miner and his wife, a former teacher, reading original witness statements in their authentic local accents.In that same room one ex-miner commented that our local MP had raising the disaster in the House of Commons, and showed Steve the link on his phone. This led to his rethinking of the opening sequence of the film. This eventually culminated in a virtual reality simulation of the 19th century pit-top created by another ex-miner, Alan Andrews (The Art of Mining). See opening clip at https://vimeo.com/542865947.

Images: Makeshift studio © Andrew Munro
Approach to the Oaks © Alan Andrews

The Rhythm of the Martyrs During our background research we were helped by a range of people from residents and shop assistants to taxi-drivers, through musicians, writers and artists who had been on opposing sides during the troubles, and cultural agencies and initiatives formed around and as a result of the 1998 agreement. The most powerful image of art moving beyond conflict was perhaps this one by Danny Devenney, where in front of one of the traditional sectarian murals in the shadow of the Black Mountains, walls (of the mind) are graphically broken down by a range of comic superheroes.

Image: Superheroes © Garance Maréchal

4. The Deep Core
VOE captures continuities and underlying stabilities

Black Snow The sculptor of the memorial, Graham Ibbeson, discovered through his background research that he had lost a relative in the disaster, which he emotionally and unexpectedly revealed during his filmed interview as part of a family mining history dating back to the 18th century. Many other families revealed such long histories and connections to us during the project, which proved so important that the unveiling of the memorial itself was done by the two youngest descendant of the disaster victims that could be traced.

Image: Barnsley Premiere © Andrew Lawrence

The Rhythm of the Martyrs Part of the exhibition on peace walls looked at the involvement of the arts in the peace movement more widely, including music and song in an audiovisual immersive experience. Each of the two communities, Catholic and Protestant, had their own typically characteristic forms of instrumentation. When looking at the symbolic importance of the lambeg (Pritestant) and bodhran (Catholic) drums to their respective communities, as percussionists we could both play the bodhran, but had never got close to the native Ulster Lambeg. So we went to Belfast and had a lesson, to get closer to the culture than archive work alone.

Image: Bryan on the Lambeg © Stephen Linstead

5. Myriad Filaments
VOE traces embeddedness and connections

Black Snow People from all over the region had shared their stories and ideas with us, so on the day of unveiling the memorial we offered a free premiere of the film in the restored 1950s local cinema. There was a capacity audience of 400, who queued round the block including TV and theatre award-winning actress Maxine Peake. Over 1000 attended the unveiling.

Images: Barnsley Premiere © Bryan Ledgard

The Rhythm of the Martyrs When we returned to Cupar Way in 2019 we found that a new temporary exhibition, WALL on WALL, by photographer Kai Wiedenhöfer, had been mounted to augment the existing artwork to show perspectives from similar walls that divided communities globally. In 2019, in the context of Trump's wall initiative, this gave even greater impact to our efforts to show the important contribution that art can make to civilising and humanising processes in conflicted communities.

Image: International Walls © Bryan Ledgard

6. The Deep Core
VOE captures continuities and underlying stabilities

Black Snow The Premiere gave us some national publicity, and on completion of the project in September 2017 we began to enter the film into competition. We achieved over 80 selections, showings and awards globally including one from the Hollywood International Independent Documentary Awards, and Best Research Film 2018 from UKRI/AHRC presented at BAFTA. We achieved a TV run of 30 showings to date, are nationally archived by BFI, and have viewings/reads of 9m so far. In 2015 when we started relatively few people even locally had heard of the disaster. Images from the film also feature on the permanent information board as part of the memorial and the National Workplace Day of Remembrance is now held on the anniversary of the disaster.

Image: Hollywood award / Memorial © Stephen Linstead

The Rhythm of the Martyrs A two-room exhibition, featuring immersive 360° vision and 16 channel sound, was delayed by Covid-19, but will be launched in Holy Week 2022. It is the first time such a multimedia approach has been taken to these issues on the British mainland. The images have already been donated to the publicly accessible Peace Walls online archive run by the architecture department of University College London and architects, Kreider & O'Leary http://www.peacewall-archive.net