

# REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN DOCUMENTARIES

## HOW CAN PRODUCTION METHODS AFFECT REPRESENTATION?

Do documentary participants feel more open on camera if the director is also an active participant sharing their own experiences? These seven interviews give the viewer no breathing room to escape or reflect between accounts, reflecting the claustrophobic rush of childhood trauma and subsequent battles with severely poor mental health for these women.

**Director Joshua Oppenheimer** acknowledges production as an integral aspect of storytelling by recruiting the perpetrators of the Indonesian genocide to re-enact their atrocities. Together they make a film in which they are the victims and perpetrators, through which Oppenheimer weaves a meta-narrative which re-enacts, re-imagines, and re-allocates trauma. The perpetrators are documented throughout the process, and the audience witnesses their transformation from a state of pride in denial to disgust at the reality of their acts. The camera is not ignored or hidden, but rather plays an active role in the process and outcome of storytelling.

### *The Act of Killing*

Nadiya shares a personal and vulnerable insight into her life with anxiety, but the closeness of the documentary is interrupted often by the BBC style guide, which creates sudden breaks in the piece, and distances the viewer from the emotive storytelling.

### *Nadiya: Anxiety and Me*

### *Kingdom of Us*

How can a family remember their father years after his suicide? The viewer is brought into the family unit through a combination of home videos and a single, intimate, director-participant relationship.

### *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*

Daniel Johnston spent the majority of his life documenting himself, creating his own American myth. The documentary cannot avoid the common connection between art and mental health, but it does so in a compassionate, nuanced way. Daniel's close friends and family feature heavily throughout the piece, highlighting the fact that Daniel attracted people towards him who would defend and support him passionately. Everyone involved has a clear sense of his genius as undeniable, and that his mental health struggles formed a large part of that artistic articulation. While his creative brilliance was evident long before his severe mental health decline, his demons surely shaped the form of his expression.

### *Louis Theroux: Selling Sex*

Ashleigh, a participant in the documentary, expressed concerns before and after its release, about her representation, and its ramifications for the sex worker community. Clear communication and cooperation with participants, ethical research, and conflict resolution appear to have failed here. When mental health is an area of focus, the impact of the documentary on participants' mental health must be a priority.

## Research aims

Explore the representation of people with mental health conditions in documentary film

Develop a collaborative reflexive documentary practice with volunteers

Produce a documentary that documents the research process, is part of the research process, and communicates research outcomes

Explore the overlap in roles of filmmaker and subject, to question traditional models of allocating representation to filmmakers, and investigate the feasibility of representational autonomy

## Method

Select a collection of documentaries for myself and a group of participants to watch and discuss, with differing approaches to mental health representation

Film the process of watching by myself, and discussing with participants, to form part of a larger documentary about mental health representation in documentaries

Create an opportunity for participants to dictate their own representation as part of the documentary - exploring production approaches, and providing a greater filmmaking understanding and vocabulary

The documentary will be reflexive, acting as research process and output

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