

Research in Context Essay - Muriel Drinkwater Swansea Cold Case

Introduction

In this essay I will discuss ideas I am currently developing in collaboration with a student colleague, Finn, for making a docudrama film about a cold case murder that was committed in the Swansea area over seventy years ago. The essay will discuss the development of the docudrama form over the past few decades and its relationship with other forms of documentary. The ethical and legal issues when making a docudrama for public release will also be considered. But first, I will discuss the actual cold case around which the film is being made.

I am currently collaborating with another student to create the first episode of a short docudrama series, called *Little Red Riding Hood*. The series focuses on the actual murder of a young girl, Muriel Drinkwater, who was brutally murdered near her home in Tyle Du, Swansea in 1946. This murder mystery story will be based on accurate, real-life events which have never been solved. My role in the making of the first episode is in post-production and cinematography, while Finn's role is as writer and director.

A fictional character, Noah, has been created who has an interest in cold cases and mysteries. A second fictional character, called Isobella, becomes friends with Noah and they investigate the case together. Their interaction will help dramatise the story. However, all the facts of the case will be accurate. One issue that will need to be considered, however, is whether our fictional characters solve the murder (recent investigations have revealed a strong suspect, but no forensic evidence is available), or leave it unsolved, respecting the fact that we don't really know what happened. The case is certainly interesting enough without creating a fictionalised ending. To increase the authenticity of the series, we aim to film the first episode in some of the areas in which the crime took place.

Summary of the facts of the case

The case involved a twelve-year-old girl called Muriel Drinkwater who was raped and then murdered by shooting. Thousands of men were questioned about the murder but police only had one suspect, a man called Harold Jones who was known to have killed two young

girls when he was a teenager. However, he was later ruled out of the Drinkwater case by forensics (Rees and Davies 2019).



Drinkwater Family Photo – Muriel is in the centre of the photo (Rees and Davies 2019)

Muriel lived with her mother and father on a farm and attended Gowerton Grammar School. On the day of her death, she walked back from school through woodland to her parents' house, her usual route home from school (Rees and Davies 2019). Her mother saw her coming back towards the house but by the time she had moved away from the window, Muriel had disappeared. At first, when Muriel didn't arrive home, Margaret wasn't too worried. She thought her daughter must have gone off to play with friends. But after a few hours, her father and other locals began searching for her. Muriel's body was found the next day along with the gun that had killed her, a WWI era colt 45 (Rees and Davies 2019).



Image of the gun used in the murder of Muriel Drinkwater (Rees and Davies, 20-19)

Over time more pieces of evidence emerged. For example, a children's book that belonged to Muriel, was found in a charity shop in Carmarthen some decades later, and then DNA on her coat was discovered sixty years after her death (2003). Her coat had been left in an

evidence room for all that time, and when new technology emerged that was able to detect tiny traces of DNA, her coat was tested again and found to have human semen on it. This became the oldest piece of evidence to be re-examined in the UK (Rees & Davis 2019).

Muriel's death was known at the time as the Little Red Riding Hood Murder because of the bright red coat she was wearing (Riley 2019). According to Helen Vnuk (2020), Muriel Drinkwater was 'a choirgirl who dreamed of being a schoolteacher.' When she was dropped off the bus on June 27, she was still singing as she 'skipped along the path through the woods to the farmhouse' (Vnuk 2020).

A boy passed her called Hubert Hoyles. He had bought eggs from Muriel's mother Margaret. According to Vnuk, Margaret was making a pot of tea when she saw Muriel outside through a gap in the trees, only 500 metres away from the house. According to Margaret, Muriel waved. It was the last time she saw her daughter alive (Vnuk 2020).

"She lost sight of her for a few moments," former detective inspector Paul Bethell says in the BBC documentary *Dark Land: Hunting The Killers*. "The crime scene is a short distance from the farmhouse. She had been attacked on the lane and then she was dragged to where the body was left."

The next day, a police officer found her body in the undergrowth of the woods. One of her hands was raised and her eyes were open. Not only had she been shot, but also battered, raped and then shot twice in the chest. The weapon used to bludgeon her was not found, but cigarette ends and sweet wrappers were found nearby. The killer may have lain in wait for her (Vnuk 2020).

Hubert was questioned by police. He reported not seeing anyone near the house the day of Muriel's murder but he had noticed a man in his thirties, well dressed with a local accent and 'thick, fluffy hair', a few weeks earlier. The man had questioned Hubert and told him to move on (Vnuk 2020).

A description of the man was released and police checked on every home within a 400 square kilometres area and interviewed over 20,000 men from the Swansea, Aberdare and Carmarthenshire, but with no results (Vnuk, 2020).



School friends attend the grave of Muriel Drinkwater in July 1946. Image: Getty.

After the funeral, Muriel's religious parents never went to church again. Eventually they moved to England (Wales Online 2018, cited by Vnuk, 2020).

As time passed, people still speculated as to who had killed Muriel. While many suspected Hubert, some thought a man called Harold Jones to be a more likely culprit (Vnuk, 2020). Jones was a serial killer (pictured as a 15-year-old below) who killed two young girls when he was just 15 and was jailed for 20 years. He confessed to both murders, saying the reason was "a desire to kill", but wasn't sentenced to death because he was under 16 (Rees & Davis 2019). On his release in 1941 Jones joined the army. He left military service in 1946. Muriel was murdered four months later, causing people to suspect he may have committed the crime. But Jones was definitively ruled out as a suspect after the coat was tested for DNA (Rees and Davis 2019).

Jones had an uneventful life until his death in 1971. His daughter was ignorant of his crimes, until he died (Rees and Davis 2019).



Serial killer Harold Jones pictured as a 15-year-old and then after leaving prison, killed two young girls when he was just 15 and was jailed for 20 years (Rees and Davies 2019).



Freda Burnell and her friend Florrie Little (Rees and Davies, 2019)

Using the DNA evidence, police were finally able to clear Hubert. But a new suspect emerged as a result of a 2020 documentary called *Dark Land: Hunting the Killers*: a man called Ronnie Harries. In 1953, Harries murdered two of his relatives, John and Phoebe Harries, who lived on a farm west of Carmarthen. He attacked them with a hammer and buried one of them alive. Harries became the last man to be sentenced to death in Carmarthen. Investigators from the *Dark Land* documentary found that Harries had worked at the Drinkwater farm as a farmhand. As a result, DNA was taken from relatives of Harries

but the results have not been made public. The case remains under "active consideration" (Vnuk, 2020).

What is a docudrama?

According to Hoffer and Nelson (1978) 'The docudrama has been defined as a unique blend of fact and fiction which dramatizes events and historical personages from our recent memory.' Docudramas combine entertainment and information in a way that is not possible with a straightforward documentary. While documentaries have a subjective element to them, they are still true to the actual events that happened. However, a docudrama may reorder events, and 'recreate and restructure' for dramatic purposes (Hoffer & Nelson, 1978).

A docudrama can be defined as 'a television recreation based on fact even though it relies on dialogue, actors, sets, and costumes to recreate an earlier event' (Hoffer & Nelson, 1978). There are many forms of documentary. Druick (2013) contrasts the documentary genre from instructional films, TV news and YouTube videos. She argues that the documentary form was 'from the outset a filmic discourse to Hollywood,' something that could show people 'reality as it was' by making clear the relationships between power structures, consumerism and the Hollywood fantasy (Druick, 2013).

Documentaries in the past were primarily concerned with telling the truth and exposing injustice, not with 'aesthetic concerns'. But as the need for more programmes to be made grew to fill the increasing number of TV channels and streaming platforms, pressure increased to make documentaries more watchable and entertaining. The result was an explosion in the field of documentary-making in the 1990s alongside digital documentary and reality TV productions (Druick, 2013).

Over time, the documentary form shifted from being completely educational to something more entertaining but still factual. The documentary form remains significant in television and in streaming channels. As Druick (2013) points out, the modern documentary has links with other forms of popular and reality television. There is a large number of documentary forms that now exist, including the mockumentary, docufiction, fly on the wall, factual tv, and docudrama (De Leeuw, 2022).

Legal Aspects

When making a docudrama there are legal requirements that need to be considered. The first step is to undertake a risk assessment. This should include establishing 'which characters are still alive, whether defamatory claims will be made and whether any private information will be disclosed.' The importance of identifying those parts of the storyline that are based on fact and those that will be pure fiction from the very beginning of the process, and stating which of those are true and which fiction, is vital. However, a disclaimer alone does not mean that the film makers are automatically legally covered (Daniels 2018).

According to Daniels, when featuring a real person in a documentary, the facts of their life should be researched and verified in the same way as for a factual documentary. Similarly, any witness accounts used in the film must be checked, as witness accounts cannot always be taken at face value (Daniels 2018).

If characters are portrayed as 'doing or saying something negative', or if events are not accurate, there is a risk breaking the Ofcom code of fairness and accusations of defamation being made. Privacy issues could become problematic too if the film shows 'sensitive and private aspects of someone's life', such as matters relating to health or sex (Daniels 2018).

Consideration should be given to the impact of the film on the person featured, and their friends and family. Even if the person's life is being fictionalised, it still has to be accurate and not portray the person unfairly. Contacting those featured if they are still alive is advisable (Daniels 2018).

In relation to the film I am making, one of Muriel's living cousins had made a statement about the impact of her death on the family (Vnuk, 2020).

Conclusion

Researching the Muriel Drinkwater case in more detail through this essay has affected how I want the story to be told. The whole idea for making the series a docudrama rather than a documentary came about as a result of finding out that her picture book was found in a Carmarthen charity shop a few years ago. It presented an opportunity to present the film from a different perspective, that of the person who found the book, rather than from the

view of someone who just decided to explore a cold-cases. It gives a dramatic angle to the story, and using a purely fictional character for this means that there are fewer concerns about how they are represented.

The docudrama is a different film making process to a documentary. The documentary is more about presenting facts and timelines, while a docudrama includes aspects of the documentary but is more entertaining and the individuals involved can be brought to life and their emotions conveyed on screen. But adding an element of fiction does mean that a new narrative is being created, and the viewer may get a distorted view of the facts, through imagined conversations and action scenes.

Prior to writing this essay, I was not aware of the importance of the legal aspects of making documentaries and docudramas. I now realise that if I want to make a documentary, of any kind, I need to make sure I do not misrepresent the facts of the story. When watching documentaries, I had been unaware of how much film makers have to deal with the legal aspects, and the extra research and work this requires. This process also highlights how much respect and care needs to be taken, particularly when there are living relatives and friends of the person or people of interest. Murder cases are even more sensitive. Cold cases, such as the Muriel Drinkwater murder, could easily descend into speculation and become just for entertainment. Without the oversight of public bodies such as OFCOM, the accuracy of the details of a situation, and the fairness to all those being discussed in the film, could be lost. As someone with an interest in making documentaries and docudramas, it is possible that I may need to get legal advice before making a film like this in the future.

The ending of the film is still undecided. The research we have done around the case has caused us to think about the problems that might arise from having the fictional character solve the case and the need to respect the impact of that might have on living relatives.

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