



# FILM RESEARCH IN REF IMPACT

## HOW FILM AS RESEARCH OUTPUTS FEATURED IN REF 2014 AND WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNED TO CREATE STRONG CASES FOR 2021

### SUMMARY

The use of film in impact case studies was widespread in REF 2014, appearing in all but two of the units of assessment (UoAs). Despite this prevalence, there are few clear examples of strong underpinning research in film that then led to strong impact in a case study. Instead, there are a variety of uses of film that stand out. Many of the impact case studies use film for research dissemination, sometimes researchers provide content for films from their research, and in a number of cases film archives are created or brought into the public domain. In this review, we are focusing on the smaller subset of case studies which do include filmmaking as underpinning research, to draw out ways in which filmmaking research can have impact and how it is successfully presented. Despite the small numbers, there are clear lessons to be learned about how to create and tell strong impact stories from filmmaking research.

Research in filmmaking lends itself well to creating beneficial impacts on society. It does this by generating creative outputs, by challenging societal norms, by raising awareness or by creating educational tools and resources. This case study is designed to help filmmaking researchers make the most of opportunities for impact development and recognition, by identifying good practice.

This analysis relies on the content of the REF 2014 case study database to provide insights into what worked and what didn't. A total of 1,347 REF case studies mention film or video, nearly 20% of the total, and by far the majority refer to contribution to filmmaking in a creative or technical sense. The ways in which filmmaking features are hugely diverse, ranging across 34 of the 36 UoAs. They vary from film used to support the conservation of fungi (Agriculture, Veterinary, and Food Science, UoA 06), using bi-sensors to improve the capture, filming, and transmission of thrilling experiences (Computer Science and Informatics, UoA 11) through to work on underexposed film archives such as the General Post Office Film archive that has now been given UNESCO protection (History, UoA 30).

### DRILLING DOWN INTO THESE CASES, WE FOUND FIVE KEY WAYS IN WHICH FILM CONTRIBUTES TO IMPACT

1. Making a film of the research as dissemination, which then leads to impact
2. Advising makers of a film or video about content informed by research, which then leads to impact
3. A non-academic filmmaker making a film informed by a researcher's work
4. Novel aspects of filmmaking (technical) influencing practice
5. Filmmaking as underpinning research which goes on to have impact on organisations or individuals

For the first four ways, film is usually used as part of the pathway to impact; the research has been completed and a film is made to apply the research or to otherwise move it into the public domain. There are differences of emphasis for those case studies which feature film as underpinning research (type 5), partly as the filmmaking begins earlier in the research cycle. Although a film can fall into more than one category, these are the case studies we will concentrate on in the following analysis.

## CASE STUDY: THE ARBOR

**Year:** 2009

**Duration:** 94 mins

**Director/s:** Clio Barnard

**Cost:** £567,000

**Funding source:** The Arbor was commissioned and produced by Artangel and financed by Artangel and the UK Film Council.

**Distribution:** Theatrical release, DVD, UK television broadcast.

**Synopsis:** The Arbor is the powerful true story of Bradford playwright Andrea Dunbar and her troubled relationship with her daughter Lorraine.

**Case study:** [www.goo.gl/RkpsfE](http://www.goo.gl/RkpsfE)



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**Impact:** *The Arbor* case study gives a strong account of impact on policymakers and NGOs by providing a new perspective on deprivation. It has impact on participants in the film and the local community, who were able to reflect on their own circumstances with new perspectives, and on the UK film industry in terms of new approaches, investment and employment. Finally, it benefits the cultural life of the UK, demonstrated through impact on audiences and critical acclaim. There is a good account of the film in terms of 'practice as research', and the different types of impact are clearly signposted with associated evidence referenced clearly. The narrative successfully weaves in quotes, as both evidence and to strengthen the story, as well as providing evidence of critical reception, social impact, and comments from high profile individuals.

## WHAT WORKED WELL

THOSE CASES THAT DID WELL, IN HIGH SCORING UNITS, INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF IMPACT:

### IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Several case studies took a participatory approach. This worked well to achieve impact when the participants were part of a clearly defined group or groups, and the filmmaking process enhanced their self expression or sense of belonging (for example made 'creative and coherent audio-visual sense of their lives' [www.goo.gl/TjZDdH](http://www.goo.gl/TjZDdH)) or where participants could see that the film changed perceptions or challenged stereotypes. To be well-regarded in terms of impact, these cases also had to demonstrate how far they had changed perceptions or challenged prejudice in the general population, specific target groups, or communities associated with the participants, as impact on a small number of participants alone, was rarely enough for a case to be scored highly.

### DEMONSTRATING INHERENT VALUE

Some case studies relied on the inherent value within a film to achieve impact on audiences. This was rarely the only element of impact claimed, but where the film was highly regarded by critical audiences and had a wide viewership, some narratives successfully made the case that the inherent value of the topic, timeliness, structure, or methodology of the film demonstrated impact on its audiences through the viewing experience alone. These narratives included evidence of very good critical reception, audience reaction from social media or interviews, and high audience figures. However even films that were critically acclaimed (such as *I am Breathing* or *The Arbor*) called on other impact achievements to build their case such as changing attitudes, opening up new areas of filmmaking, and economic outcomes.

## SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES

Filmmaking in successful impact cases is rarely the only activity described. Very frequently, the showing of a film is accompanied by or supports other activities which include advocacy, outreach, training, talks, or debates, where the context of the film is used to draw out messages, lessons, or consider attitudes towards the content of the film. This may also be accompanied by the production of supporting materials such as information leaflets, social media campaigns, or other resources that link the content of the film to further outcomes such as changing attitudes, improving awareness, or changing behaviour. *My Dangerous Loverboy*, shown extensively in secondary schools, is accompanied by a 'cross media platform' containing educational resources, a music video, animated stories, links to social media and an awareness raising day [www.mydangerousloverboy.com](http://www.mydangerousloverboy.com). Other activities may also include coverage in the media that helps support change. Events surrounding the *Zanzibar Soccer Queens* documentary generated media reports that contributed to a change in sports education policy at a national level.

## IMPACT THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Frequently, impact from filmmaking research is enhanced by partnership with an organisation which shares the filmmaker's objectives, or where the filmmaker can support delivery of specific aims. This might include a film being commissioned or funded by a partner, for example the NHS commissioned *The Family Legacy* on sickle cell disease and Action for Prisoners' Families commissioned the play and then the film *Homeward Bound*. Sometimes partners get involved in distribution, or the film may be used in advocacy by an organisation, such as hosting screenings for specific stakeholder groups or at specific events. In this case, the filmmaker and partner organisations work together to achieve certain impacts, with the film as a tool for change.

## CROSS CUTTING APPROACHES

Cutting across all of these routes to impact is an approach that engages with topics of contemporary relevance, looks outwards to engage with specific audiences at an early stage, and builds in perspectives of communities or organisations of relevance. Not all of these successful case studies declare a change objective from the outset, but they all reveal a consideration of the outcomes of their work from an early stage, engagement with stakeholders at appropriate times, and a willingness to participate in activities to push this forward. As the makers of *I am Breathing* say: 'the impact...was never intended to be confined to critical success' and a statement on the *My Dangerous Loverboy* website declares: '...the fundamental and most important purpose of the *My Dangerous Loverboy* film is to alert young girls about the dangers of sexual exploitation'.

## CASE STUDY: ZANZIBAR SOCCER QUEENS

**Year:** 2007 & 2008

**Duration:** 87 mins & 52 mins

**Director:** Florence Ayisi

**Cost:** £70,000

**Funding source:** Independently financed/self funding

**Distribution:** Filmmakers Library, New York, USA

**Synopsis:** A provocative portrait of Women Fighters, a team of Zanzibari women playing soccer, and defining new roles and identities for themselves, in a predominantly Muslim society.

**Case study:** [www.goo.gl/LMggKt](http://www.goo.gl/LMggKt)



**Impact:** The film has contributed to a transformation in women's football in the mainly Muslim country of Zanzibar by the attention brought to the team featured in the documentary. The film inspired the media, politicians, and organisations in Zanzibar and other countries to reconsider the role of women in sport in the country. The participants in the film, from being stigmatized, became international representatives of their country, with the support of the Minister of Information, Media and Sport, and are described as 'beacons of cultural and social reform'. Activities such as showings to specific audiences including politicians, and media coverage, contributed to a change in sports education policy. This meant girls were allowed to play football in schools, for the first time, leading to improved wellbeing and self-esteem.

# PITFALLS TO BEWARE

IT IS CLEAR THAT NOT ALL CASE STUDIES FEATURING FILM AS UNDERPINNING RESEARCH SCORED HIGHLY, AND THERE ARE SOME COMMON FEATURES OF THOSE THAT WERE NOT ASSESSED STRONGLY

## UNDERPINNING RESEARCH

Some lower-scoring case studies were not clear about the research component within the filmmaking. If there is doubt that the filmmaking contains research or that the research may not be of at least 2\* quality, then the assessors may disqualify or potentially mark down the case study. Where links between underpinning research and impact are not made clear, that can also lead to a lower score.

## IMPACT NOT DISSEMINATION

The definition of impact in the REF is 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' and so it can be helpful to consider the question 'what changed?' when identifying impact. If the change cannot be described, then the impact may be limited or the case may not score highly. Some cases describe activities rather than outcomes, such as dissemination of a film, describing screenings or detailing sales, without indicating what effect the film had on its audiences. Conducting research into audience response might be a way to mitigate this shortcoming.

## WEAK EVIDENCE

As well as relying on dissemination, some case studies assumed inherent value to their film without providing any evidence to support it. To claim that a film adds value, for example, to the cultural life of the UK, evidence would be needed of supporting views from critics, awards, or at least audience feedback from surveys, testimonials or social media etc. Claiming a benefit without evidence to support it is likely to result in a lower score.

## CASE STUDY: I AM BREATHING

**Year:** 2013 **Duration:** 72 mins

**Directors:** Emma Davie, Morag McKinnon

**Cost:** £302,000

**Funding source:** Creative Scotland, Danish Film Institute, Wellcome Trust, Channel 4, YLE, DR, MND Association, UK Film Council, University of Edinburgh.

**Distribution:** TV: Channel 4, DR Denmark, YLE Finland, VPRO Holland, UR Sweden, VRT Belgium, HSCC Israel, Estonian TV, Canal+ Poland, Baltic TV.

**Non-Theatrical:** Global Screening Day in 50 countries 21/06/13

**Educational & DVD:** USA, Canada, UK Distrify (2013) (World-wide) (all media) (digital)

**Synopsis:** A documentary follows the last months of Neil Platt, a young father with terminal motor neurone disease (MND)

**Case study:** [www.goo.gl/Z2C4cT](http://www.goo.gl/Z2C4cT)



**Impact:** An emotionally powerful film which demonstrates inherent value through film awards and positive publicity, reviews and commentary. However much of the impact comes from an alliance with the Motor Neurone Disease Association (MND) to drive awareness of the disease, through coordinated global screenings on national MND awareness day. In addition, there is evidence of changed attitudes towards the disease from practitioners such as medical and scientific staff and students and how the film renewed commitment towards their work.

# BUILDING A GOOD CASE

## THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

To have a good impact story to tell from filmmaking research, it is important to articulate how the filmmaking embodies research, link the underpinning research to impact, have examples of change to document, and evidence each claim made. However, ticking all the boxes is not necessarily enough; these elements need to build into a compelling and coherent narrative. This might include quoting from relevant evidence in the text, rather than just saying it exists, providing contextual information about the topic of the film, as well as telling an engaging story which indicates to assessors why this is something they should consider has value.

## USE EVIDENCE WELL

Aim to provide corroboration for each claim of benefit you make and look to evidence impact on direct beneficiaries, such as audiences or non-academic partners including commissioners or funders. Also include indirect beneficiaries, such as the wider community. Including quotes from personal testimony is useful, whether from audience members or partner organisations, as they can speak specifically to the impact you are claiming and may be able to provide corroboration of links between research and impact. Other sorts of useful evidence include published reports by partner organisations referencing your contribution to their work, web pages or social media data, but ensure you are using evidence that shows the effect of the activity not just proof of the activity itself. The nature of impact may change over time and this can influence the types of evidence that are selected.

## INSIGHTS FROM REF PANEL 36

“Because filmmaking seeks to make an intervention into the public realm, it is often in a position to make a powerful case for impact. In making this case, however, a submission needs to bear in mind two things: first, that it also needs to make the case that this piece of filmmaking practice can be assessed as a piece of research; and second, that it has not only been disseminated in the public realm but that this dissemination has effected change of some kind.”

## KEY FINDINGS

- Demonstrate the research element in your films and a clear link to the impact. Don't rely on descriptions of your motivation, future plans or overlong descriptions of the content of the film. Focus on research questions, identification and application of methods and locating your practice firmly in an academic context.
- As far as possible provide indicators of quality. This can include awards or grants, or even selection for film festivals, where you can demonstrate some form of peer review. Critical acclaim can also be used selectively, especially from respected sources.
- Explain why the subject of the film matters, for example it could be a particularly timely or socially relevant topic. Also, who it matters to, especially if you have worked closely with organisations or partners who have benefitted. Use third party corroboration to support your claims, for example quotes from collaborators, media or commissioners.
- When describing impact, ensure you indicate what has changed. Although audience figures, the number of festival screenings, downloads or online views can be useful to indicate reach, you also need to demonstrate the effect of that activity. This might mean providing quotes from people affected by or benefitting from your work from post-viewing discussions, online comments, social media or specific interviews with key people, to collect this information.

## CASE STUDY: ACT OF KILLING

**Year:** 2012 **Duration:** 159 minutes

**Director:** Joshua Oppenheimer

**Co-directors:** Anonymous, Christine Cynn

**Cost:** £1.1m

**Funding source:** Danish Film Institute, Arts and Humanities Research Council, ZDF/Arté, The Media Programme of the European Union, University of Westminster, Nordic Film and TV Fund, The Norwegian Film Institute, The Freedom of Expression Foundation, several anonymous foundations

**Distribution:** Worldwide theatrical, television and online release.

**World Sales:** Cinephil.



**Synopsis:** In a country where killers are celebrated as heroes, the filmmakers challenge unrepentant death squad leaders to dramatize their role in genocide. The hallucinatory result is a cinematic fever dream, an unsettling journey deep into the imaginations of mass-murderers and the shockingly banal regime of corruption and impunity they inhabit.

**Case studies:** [www.goo.gl/1Aw4SU](http://www.goo.gl/1Aw4SU) **And:** [www.goo.gl/yf9pWV](http://www.goo.gl/yf9pWV)

**Impact:** Submitted as case studies by both director and producer, *The Act of Killing* is the highest profile research film made in the last 10 years. It has received huge recognition, numerous awards and an Oscar nomination in 2014 in recognition of its 'innovative approach and emotional and political impact'. Aside from its impact on audiences, internationally the film had impact on Indonesian politics and civil society through an outreach team of human rights organisations and journalists who arranged private screenings, and inspired major investigative reporting. This resulted in a change to public discourse around the historical events depicted in the film, including a report by the National Commission on Human Rights, condemning the genocide and recommending a truth and reconciliation process.

### FURTHER READING

The complete REF case study database can be found at: [www.goo.gl/LmVzzo](http://www.goo.gl/LmVzzo)

**Some other useful case studies to read include:**

**A Scottish Self-Portrait:** The Northern Lights Documentary Project: [www.goo.gl/6hAN3N](http://www.goo.gl/6hAN3N)

**Missing Out – Action For Prisoners’ Families:** [www.goo.gl/qu9XCT](http://www.goo.gl/qu9XCT)

**Sickle Cell Awareness:** [www.goo.gl/en1f5D](http://www.goo.gl/en1f5D)

**My Dangerous Loverboy:** [www.goo.gl/Vhqiek](http://www.goo.gl/Vhqiek)

**Changing Minds: Engaging with Science through Creative Documentary:** [www.goo.gl/dokMHZ](http://www.goo.gl/dokMHZ)

### ABOUT FRN

The Filmmaking Research Network (FRN) provides insight into the condition and dimensions of filmmaking as research. FRN aims to consolidate the field of filmmaking research by sharing best practice internationally, and developing resources. Funded by the AHRC, the FRN is a partnership between the University of Sussex (UK) and the University of Newcastle (Australia).

[www.filmakingresearch.net](http://www.filmakingresearch.net)

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