

Western Sydney University

Milissa Deitz

All the little boxes

Biographical note

Dr Milissa Deitz lectures in communication and digital media at Western Sydney University. She is a journalist and novelist. Milissa's book *Watch This Space: The Future of Australian Journalism* (2010) was published by Cambridge University Press. Her novel, *Bloodlust*, and non-fiction title, *My Life as a Side Effect*, are both published by Random House. Her research and scholarly interests include voice and the marginalised within digital storytelling (*The Right to Know: 100 Years of the Australian Red Cross International Tracing Service*, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2015); young people, wellbeing and technology (<http://www.invisiblecity.org.au>); and grief, identity and family.

Keywords

Creative writing – Storytelling – Ritualising grief – Heteroglossia – Temporality – Identity

Introduction

My two children are biological siblings who joined our family when they were six months old respectively. My partner and I are their parents and legal guardians who incorporate into our family life four annual, court-ordered visits with their biological parents. I make this point in order to illustrate the ethical, as well as theoretical and creative, issues within my wider project, of which a short film (script below) is a part. I want to respect the privacy of my children and my partner, and I want to respect the stories of others entwined with my own. When my little girl died unexpectedly, my mind fractured. In order to show the vertigo, disassociation and hyperarousal of what is known as complicated grief, the non-confluence between image, sound and word was uppermost in my mind when conceptualising *All the Little Boxes*. A performance of *All the Little Boxes*, directed by Iqbal Barkat, can be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/192541982>.

THERE ARE NO CHARACTERS, ONLY A FEMALE VOICEOVER (F.VO)

(Complete darkness, with only the sound of water dripping, slowly revealing the back of a figure walking through an abandoned train tunnel towards an overgrown landscape.)

F.VO: I am pressed for time, time past. At first, I lived from moment to moment, then I lived from minute to minute.

(The back of the veiled figure's head is seen moving through an abandoned house with the background seemingly moving at a different pace to the figure, as if the figure were floating.)

F.VO: After a few weeks, the father of my children asked me what we would do. I told him our only choice was to live from hour to hour. Few people can say *I am here*. They look for themselves in the past and in the future. I see now, because I am always here.

Were it possible for my mind to forget, my body will not let me.

I am here, but this is not my voice because I am not myself.

I am living every moment over and over again. Will that end too?
What will be left then?

My grief is now part of my love. It is my everyday ... it is making my way across a mountain range with a weight heavier than my own body. I cannot stand or think or read or sleep or talk or remember or forget. But I ache for her with every cell of my being.

I am a story that is happening to me, but sometimes the words are unfaithful to the things.

(Cut to yet another room, still the back of a veiled figure's head.)

F.VO: Now I walk in the ruins, between two eternities, in the space between being and non-being, between the realm of things and the realm of thought.

(Figure's POV looking through a ceiling damaged by fire to the floor, and continuing to look at objects throughout the house.)

F.VO: Now I am a creature of the gaps, a creature of the in-between. Temporal binding ... an inability to join time. I am between was and is and will be. I am in the place where there is only yearning.

I am unaware of the *Kaddish*, the prayer that Jewish mourners recite many times a day for eleven months after a death. Instead, I count up to ten objects in a room many times a day and will do so for as long as I am here.

(Darkness reveals the face of the veiled woman, tired and resigned. The camera stays on her face as she continues to move through the house seemingly out of time with the background.)

F.VO: At first, I was in a place where there was no time. I was not in the world, but I was not in myself. I was where everything was hyperreal. Too bright, too loud, too quick. That was the time before I realised there were moments that followed other moments, but after the time when I thought I could change time.

In the liminal space between sleeping and waking, we leave the house at ten, not nine, we don't make plans, we are spontaneous, we turn left instead of right, we turn suddenly.

In the liminal space, I control the future in order to erase the past and I stop her from leaving. But never for more than a moment. I keep trying until it becomes clear that there are only fragments of time in which to move and there will never be enough time. I will never be able to act in time.

(The figure moves outside.)

F.VO: Then came the time when I could move in time. I am where I need to be, but in time I realise I have no control. I cannot make changes within time, I can only watch. Again and again and again. Again. Again. The father of my children is here too, but we are never in the same place at the same time.

(We again see the face of the woman as she moves from room to room aimlessly.)

F.VO: I use another's speech in another's language to explain where I am. I attempt to explore the conflicts inherent in having more than one sense

of time, the disparities between the temporal sensibilities. We are all existing, in this moment, in multiple, interrelated senses of time, but I am also here in the now and always.

You will never get over this, but you will get through it, said someone.

You sound the same. You sound like yourself, said someone.

It's against nature said someone using my voice.

(Figure's POV of room.)

F.VO: My little boy. I will not call him by his name. He called her Lola, but that was not her name. Where is she?, my son asks, looking at the photo in the locket I wear around my neck. She is everywhere, I tell him.

I see pictures of the mother, the mother who looks like my daughter. I want her to come and live with us, but I don't tell anyone. She asks for photographs. It takes me a long time to choose them. Some of the photos are for no one else because if someone else has them they will have a part of her and she is mine. I will share stories but I will not share her.

F.VO: And I will not share all the stories. Not because I own them, but because I am the only one who can bear them. They are heavy inside me. Sometimes their weight makes it hard to breathe. To stand up. This is how I get through it but not over it.

I don't know how you cope you are amazing you are strong I could never survive what you have survived.

But I have not survived. I am not here. I have not coped because I no longer exist as I was.

(The camera moves in front of the woman whose face is now in darkness as she moves back into the darkness of the tunnel.)

F.VO: Sometimes my son asks me where I am. I am right here with you, I tell him, but sometimes I need to be with your sister.

Research statement

Research background

This project affords the logic of parataxis in order to theorise, ritualise and create from bereavement. Bakhtin's discourse theories suggest creative ways to understand heterogenous experiences of temporality due to trauma, and their re-creation in narrative (Morson 1991: 1071–92).

Research contribution

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and his theories about narrative provide a starting point for understanding experiences of temporality, which he theorises as a way to examine questions about human existence. Writing about Bakhtinian translinguistics and film criticism, Palmer argues: 'Cinema, unlike literature, has no corresponding language to objectify and examine in the very process of representation' (1989: 332).

Research significance

Noë writes: 'The task of phenomenology, or of experiential art, ought to be not so much to depict or describe experience, but rather to catch experience in the act of making the world available' (2004: 176). The wider project's aim is to explore the lack of ritual surrounding death in the West. I have long been fascinated by public displays of grief accompanying celebrity death and the deaths of ordinary citizens after atrocities.

Works cited

Bakhtin, M 1981 *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, M Holquist (ed), C Emerson and M Holquist (trans), U of Texas P, Austin and London

Freud, S 1917/1957 'Mourning and melancholia' 1917 in J Strachey (ed), *The standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud*, 14, Hogarth P, London: 152–70

Morson, GS 1991 'Bakhtin genres and temporality', *New Literary History* 22: 1071–92

Noë, A 2004 *Action in perception*, MIT P, Cambridge, MA

Worden, JW 2001, *Grief counselling and grief therapy*, 3rd ed, Springer, New York

Palmer, RB 1989 'Bakhtinian translinguistics and film criticism: The dialogical image?' in RB Palmer (ed) *The cinematic text: Methods and approaches*, AMS P, New York