Tuinn Cagarach (Whispering Waves) - A sketch for a sound archive led feature documentary film.

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Abstract:

Tuinn Cagarach (Whispering Waves) is a 20 minute proof of concept for a feature length documentary set in the Outer Hebrides in north west Scotland. It aims to explore the role of the Scottish Gaelic language, and its historically recorded stories, songs and retelling of events, in the understanding of the contemporary significance of the sea and fishing industries to the island's cultural, and particularly linguistic futures. The film combines Gaelic language sound archive recorded by ethnographers in the middle of the 20th century with contemporary observational documentary images filmed with the fishing community in the islands today. The project aims to both examine the links between Gaelic and fishing, as well as explore of the capacity of sound archive led creative documentary filmmaking to foster connections between the past and present for audiences.

Keywords: Documentary Film, Sound Archive, Gaelic, Fishing, Outer Hebrides.

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Video Link:

Tuinn Cagarach (Whispering Waves) - 20 Min Proof of Concept.

<https://vimeo.com/348421725>

Password: whisperingwavesPOC

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'We moderns, despite our mechanistic and rationalistic ethos, live in landscapes filled with ghosts'
(Bell 1998, 813).

The islands of the Outer Hebrides, situated in the north west of Scotland, are one of the last strongholds of the Scottish Gaelic language and its culture. This is a language that has been spoken in the islands for well over 1000 years, and which was previously spoken across Scotland. The Outer Hebrides are an island archipelago with 15 inhabited islands, each with their own history and many with their own dialectical variations of the language. However, they are more widely known collectively through various names including the Outer Hebrides, Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles), or Innse Gall (Islands of Strangers). These multiple names hint at the layers of history that are embedded within the islands, and in the memory and stories of the those who today call them home.

These island communities today remain deeply connected to the sea that surrounds them. They resonate with Dirlik's observation of the role of ecology and topography in our understanding of place (2011: 56), and these connections are acutely clear with the continued importance that the island's fishing community play both culturally, and economically. Furthermore, the sea's role as a protagonist in collective Hebridean history and lore is unmistakable. It is embedded in Gaelic oral histories through songs and stories passed on from generation to generation and perhaps best understood through Màiri Chaimbeil's suggestion that the sea acts 'as an emotional landscape', and as an 'ever present and ever changing element in the lives of the Gaels of the Hebrides' (2002, 56).

The ongoing connection between the language, the sea and the islands' fishing communities has been brought into focus through recent research from linguistic anthropologist Magnus Course, whose ethnographic work highlighted that today 'fishing plays a fundamental role in maintaining and transmitting

the Gaelic language' (Course 2018, 2).¹ This connection extends to the role of the traditional ecological knowledge bound up within the language and inshore fishers' commitment to sustainability (see Course 2021).² These findings are in tune with Dirlik's suggestion of the 'organic connectedness of culture, social existence, and the natural environment' (2011: 65), or an 'ecological social sensibility' (ibid: 68), present within indiginism more broadly. This understanding of the fishing community as one of today's Gaelic strongholds also wades into an ongoing conversation surrounding the preservation of the language in Scotland (see MacLeod and Smith-Christmas 2018) and more recently uncertainty around fisheries and marine policy and its consequences for the Gaelic language.

This historic and contemporary context was the genesis of the feature length creative documentary film *Iorram (Boat Song)* (2021). This 96-minute film blends Gaelic sound archive from the mid 20th century with contemporary moving images I filmed over a period of three years with the fishing community of the islands, both on and off the water. The project aims to explore both this historic and contemporary relationship between the fishing communities and the Gaelic language, as well as the capacity for sound archive to be used in creative documentary film as a means to explore embedded history within the observationally filmed present.³

Iorram's conception as a piece of creative documentary filmmaking began in 2017, and vital to its progression to full production was the creation of a 20-minute proof of concept (POC) in 2018, using the project's working title at the time of *Tuinn Cagarach (Whispering Waves)*. This piece of work was not created for a general public audience, but instead aimed to test the underpinning creative ideas of the project, as well as bring on board the rest of the key creative team and funders that would see the feature length project through to completion. Crucially, it aimed to understand if the concept of the film, of setting contemporary observational moving images and a newly written score, against an entirely sound archive-based dialogue track, had the potential to carry with it the project's wider inquiry aims and sustain a feature length film that both Gaelic speaking, and non-Gaelic speaking audiences could engage with.

The POC was created from around the first 30-40% of the raw visual material that was eventually used for the final film.⁴ The project's visual aim at the outset had been to create an observational portrait of the islands, leaning on an ethnographic approach of capturing the everyday activity of the fishing community, while also aiming to focus on the individuals involved in the various processes being observed. Having flexibility within the final feature edit was vital at this early stage, and included giving options for narrative devices such as daily and seasonal time shifts, visual explorations within and between islands, outlining of individual and collective industrial processes as well as capturing enough visual material to give options to lean on returning characters.

The sound archive selected for inclusion in the POC was also very much a test selection. The entire archive that was available was almost overwhelmingly extensive, with around 30,000 Gaelic audio clips catalogued and directly available, along with many more available on request.⁵ The material I focused my search on was Gaelic language recordings from the islands, which began from 1937, but were recorded largely from the late 1940s onwards. The broad themes of the sea and fishing gave some further boundaries to the archival research, but within the POC it was important to test a variety of material on a timeline, including song, oral histories, traditional stories, mythology, first person memories and second hand anecdotes.

This process also included testing strategies to balance a viewer's potential engagement and the need of formal narrative structures, such as the 24 hour daily cycle eventually given to the visual content in the POC. This testing process also aimed to better understand to what extent the final film would need to narrativise

¹ Magnus Course is also the co-producer on the final feature film *Iorram (Boat Song)*, and co-director with me on the ESRC supported short documentary film created early on in the project's development called *Muir ar n-athraichean (Our Fathers Sea)* which used contemporary interview and observational filming to explore these issues.

² See also the NatureScot report on wider relationships between Gaelic and Ecosystem Services in Scotland (Maclean 2021).

³ The feature film premiered at the 2021 Glasgow Film Festival and subsequently had a general cinema release and broadcast in the UK, and release internationally. For more information see iorramfilm.com.

⁴ The final film had around 60 hours of observational rushes, shot over three years over 9 filming trips to the islands, with the final two filming trips completed in early 2020 during the editing of the film. The final film also used underwater and areal material shot by specialist cinematographers.

⁵ The archive used in the project was housed in, and largely collected by, the School of Scottish Studies Archives at The University of Edinburgh. At the time of the research the public interface of the sound archive was housed on the Tobar an Dualchais (Kist o Riches) website (see Macaulay 2012 for more).

its world, or construct 'discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story' (White 1980: 7), and what form this may need to take. Or if the material might best operate in more poetic narrative modality embracing what Dai Vaughan highlights as the 'zone of flux at the leading edge of communication where poetry is fore ever congealing into prose' (Vaughan 1999: 82). However, overarching these broader structural experiments was a syntactic exploration to understand the ability of the audio content, including how the stories were told, to work with the observational visual material. It became clear early on that the positioning the archival voices into the contemporary world provided an opportunity to avoid embalming the speakers, and rather potentially highlight for viewers Pogue Harrison's observation that "culture perpetuates itself through the power of the dead" (2005, ix). Thus, the aim was to illuminate connections between the past and present and foster a final piece that took advantage of what Banks refers to as the multivocality of the documentary image (2001: 140), to create a level of cinematic ambiguity for the viewer, encouraging audiences to read the audio-visual connections not as illustrative, but constitutive in their meaning making from the film (Vaughan 1999: 83).

The use and function of music in the project, both through archive song, and instrumental score, was a further key creative test of the POC. Within the archive there were extensive song recordings, both from groups and individuals, which through the lyrics, melodies and nature of the performance on the recordings, gave fascinating insights into stories and concerns of the fishing community. They also brought with them a distinct energy, often powered by group performances, as well as raw emotion from solo performances. Within the POC a collective female voiced working song was edited alongside scallop processing as a means to connect the onshore workers from the past and today, testing the ability of the score to push the visual material to connect with the past. This approach with the sound archive was supported through the use of a draft instrumental score across the 20 minutes to both support archive, and shift energy and pacing within the edit. However, the capacity of the score to be interwoven with the chosen archive highlighted the need for a new, originally composed score for the feature film.⁶

While the POC is far from a final piece of documentary filmmaking, it provides, I suggest, a creative snapshot of a pivotal moment within the production of the feature length documentary film it was conceptualising. While the eventual funders and creative team that joined the project saw what they needed in it, more importantly, it acted as a vital canvas to find creative clarity for myself as the director, helping to establish a thread through the Hebridean pasts and presents, the shadows, whispers, people and places, and the mass of sonic and visual worlds, that then lay before me.

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⁶ The draft score used in the POC was taken from samples from Scottish group Lau, which was chosen specifically to test their contemporary approach to traditional music against the archive and visual material in the film. The original soundtrack for *Iorram* was eventually scored by Aidan O'Rourke, who is also their fiddle player.

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