"Interview: Emotional Proximity through *Inside the Distance*: A Conversation with Sharon Daniel." *The Digital Imaginary: Literature and Cinema of the Database*. . New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 29–42. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501347597.ch-003>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 04:57 UTC.

Copyright © Roderick Coover and Contributors 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Interview

Emotional Proximity through *Inside the Distance*: A Conversation with Sharon Daniel

Sharon Daniel makes interactive, cinematic works that substantially take on questions of social justice, health, and cultural dialog. For example, Public Secrets uses an interactive interface to follow the personal accounts of women who have been incarcerated in California, and Blood Sugar presents the accounts of twenty current or former injection drug users participating in an HIV prevention and needle exchange program in Oakland, CA. Both works give voice to disenfranchised individuals, drawing users into the perspectives of populations whose lack of self-representation has led to deep misunderstanding, demonization, and dehumanization. Where those works used a graphic interface to conjoin oral accounts, Inside the Distance significantly expands this approach through interactive and dramatic video. The project focuses upon an innovative program in Belgium known as restorative justice by which victims and offenders are offered the opportunity to take active roles in the conclusion of their cases through mediation. Both sides must be willing to participate. The interactive format allows users to switch among the stories of the crime and of the remedial processes that are told by victims, offenders, mediators, and criminologists. The approach builds dramatic tension without the melodrama of enactment common to much single-channel filmmaking. Separated by a criminal justice mediator and the length of a table, victim meets criminal. The table is a complex trope that forms the theatrical stage for the encounters and enables the emotional exchange. Each listens to the other's account of the crime and its impact. The work is designed for museum installation and online viewing.

QUESTION: *How did Inside The Distance come about?*

SHARON DANIEL (SD): I've been working on issues of justice and punishment in the criminal justice system in the US for many years. I've worked with

incarcerated women, and I've also done work with injection drug users who've had encounters with the criminal justice system. I was able to exhibit some of that work at STUK in Belgium, and during the course of that exhibition, I was asked to give a talk to a group of criminologists from the KU Leuven Institute for Criminology who focus their research on restorative justice practice and theory. After the talk we all went for drinks and the curator of the exhibition, who I think had this in mind all along, said, "If you would be interested in working together, I know of a source of funding that supports arts research projects in which artists collaborate with researchers from other disciplines." We got funding, and I was able to go back and forth to Belgium over a two-year period and pursue a collaboration with this group of criminologists and mediators that focused on documenting victim-offender mediation.

I was interested in this work because I wanted to do a project that offered not just a critique of the criminal justice system but some representation of productive alternatives to retributive justice. I was intrigued by the system in Belgium, where victim/offender mediation is institutionalized within the criminal justice systems. The government funds non-profit organizations that provide mediation services. Anyone in Belgium, anyone who's a victim or an offender in the criminal context can ask for mediation, and if both parties to the crime agree, then the government provides this service. I was particularly interested in focusing on representations of how mediation has worked in a context of really serious crimes. It's kind of a no brainer to think about young people doing restorative work instead of being convicted and going to jail for something like vandalism, but the harder question is whether or not restorative justice really works when someone's been murdered or someone's been raped, or sexually assaulted in some other way. It was a little bit tricky to get access to people who have participated in mediation in these kinds of cases because these are very personal cases, when someone's been assaulted or lost a loved one. But, over time we were able to make contact with people who, as victims, had been so helped by the restorative process as opposed to the criminal justice system, and they were willing to share their stories under conditions of various different degrees of confidentiality.

Q: How was the process for you? Were you right there in the room or working from transcripts?

SD: Originally, what I wanted to do was observe a mediation process throughout the entire process, which of course begins with a kind of shuttle diplomacy where

interview for me in Flemish, and then we translated it into English. This was necessary because we agreed the project should be in English so it would be useful internationally, and I don't speak Flemish. This young woman was very concerned about confidentiality. I was not even present at the interview. The mediator did the interview, and one of the university research students did a translation. They sent me the transcript of the translation, and I had an actress do the voice-over of the sections I wanted to use. I had to edit and produce all of the project material that was related to her case and show it to her to get permission to use it, so it was a great deal of work. If she had said no, I would've been really upset, but as it turned out, she loved it, and she came to the exhibition that we had at the close of the project. So, in the end, I did get to meet her.

The exhibition was at STUK Kunstencentrum. The partners of this project were LINC, which is the Leuven Institute of Criminology, STUK Kunstencentrum, which is an art center part of whose mission is to foster new works, and me, so I guess that meant University of California, Santa Cruz, where I am faculty. At the end of the two-year research project, we did a solo exhibition of the works of mine that are focused on criminal justice, so not just this project but also the previous works *Public Secrets* and *Blood Sugar* and a new work that I've been producing in California titled *Undoing Time*. She came to that exhibition and brought her whole family, and I gave them a two-hour tour of the exhibition. She was thrilled with it. Then we had a panel session, which was part of the whole set of events around the exhibition, and we invited her to be at the panel session. The panel included a judge, the mediator Ivo Aertsen, who is the head of LINC, and a television journalist. We showed part of the project first, and this was followed by a discussion in Flemish about the project, mediation, and restorative justice. One of our partners sat next to me and whispered some translation in my ear. So, this young woman was there. When I had invited her to this panel session she asked, I won't have to say anything, right? And I said, oh no, no one is going to have any idea that you have anything to do with this project at all unless you want them to. She ended up speaking during the discussion, and at the end of it feeling like she was ready to start talking about her experience, having been a victim, in order to help other victims—so her story is in the project.

Q: That's an almost therapeutic effect of the project. I don't know if you are thinking of it in that way but ...

SD: I wouldn't presume to be providing a therapeutic experience, but I think, generally, if people have an opportunity in public or through media to talk about a traumatic experience, they can find it therapeutic.

Q: Many of your works address issues of justice and human rights, and there is an activist component to this work as well, no?

SD: Yes, I think in the case of *Inside the Distance*, the partners in the research all wanted a work that would help promote the notion of restorative justice as an alternative to retributive justice, and that is activist in nature just like in my other work. In my work in the US, which is more focused on a critique of the criminal justice system in the US, I want to give voice to people who are basically victims of structural inequality and whose behaviors are criminalized because of their poverty or their race in order to provide a context in which their voices come forward in the critique of the system that has victimized them. I hope this will help change people's minds about the efficacy of our justice system and how we think in the US about justice and punishment. So yes, in that way I think all of this work is activist. And, I think, all of the women I interviewed over a period of years for *Public Secrets* found those conversations a form of action and also therapeutic, too, because they're incarcerated and incredibly isolated. When someone comes in over and over again to listen to them and asks them what do they want to talk about, what do they want the public to know about their experiences, they're moved because someone cares enough to do that and also very glad to have the opportunity to speak out when they're otherwise so isolated and removed from society.

Q: How was it, in this case, working with actors? It must be quite a different dynamic?

SD: Yeah [laughs].

Q: Do most of the sections of Inside the Distance involve actors?

SD: Yes and no. In the "Spaces" section of the project ... I guess we should eventually go through the piece: there are three sections. "The Accounts," which are narratives of mediations as they were told to me by mediators. In that section, all of the visualizations are a kind enactment done with actors in a very stylized way, where the actors don't speak and the audio is the actual interview with the mediator. The visuals are edited to the mediator's narration and those enactments were played by actors. I'm lucky enough to have access to this beautiful black box experimental theatre space on my campus, so we took that over for four days

Figure 2.2 *Inside the Distance* has three primary sections: *Accounts*, *Positions*, and *Spaces*. In *Positions*, users follow the differing positions of victims, offenders, and mediators.

with graduate student assistants on camera and with undergraduate volunteers as production assistants and so forth. I had twelve actors playing different roles throughout the different stories. In one narrative, someone might be the victim, and in the next narrative, that actor might be an offender, or in another narrative, the mediator. I wanted to do that specifically because one thing I learned about mediation, and about restorative justice in general, is that in some way or another, everyone is a victim and everyone is an offender, in their relationships, in their lives, even if it's not within the criminal justice context. So, I wanted the actors to shift roles as a way of visualizing this concept.

Q: When that same performer has just before been in some very different role, it gives the sense that the victim, criminal, or moderator could be anyone. Working with actors in this way seems to be a big shift in your approach.

SD: Yeah, it is. It is experienced in different ways in the two different sections, “The Accounts” and “The Positions.” In “The Accounts” section, where the voices are the voices of the mediators, the characters on screen are not necessarily identified directly with a speaker. I think the viewer can easily identify that the speaker is the mediator and recognize who is the mediator in the video. But, the voice of the mediator is also speaking for the others—their thoughts and their actions—during the criminal act and after. The mediator is a sort of storyteller

figure whose story is being played out in the enactment. But in “The Positions” section, which is about the subject position of victim, offender, and mediator, the same actors play different characters throughout the section. Since each character gives a kind of “solo” performance within one of the three position panels—victim, mediator, offender left to right—the voice is more strongly identified with the image.

I guess, the interface design fixes them into the position as a mediator, a victim, or an offender at that moment in a particular screen view. But when the screen view changes—when the viewer selects one of the positions, and watches that character’s clip—the interface returns them to a different screen view. They might see the same actor then in a different role with a different voice. That might create a distancing effect but in the cases that are represented in both “The Accounts” and “The Positions” sections, the same actors play the same roles, which I think strengthens the connections and facilitates the viewer’s identification with the characters. Ultimately, I think it is more important for me to communicate the concept of the fluidity of subject positions than to create a strong identification with individual characters.

Q: Then, it brings people into the understanding of this being a role-playing experience, which seems to be an important step in expanding the therapeutic aspect of it.

Figure 2.3 Interactive video selection in *Inside the Distance*.

SD: Yes. Because, one act, one event, doesn't define a person. If you were the victim of a crime, that is not all you are. If you a mediator, that is not all you are. If you're an offender, that's not all you are. If you're an offender, you're also a victim in one way or another, if maybe not within the context of this particular set of events. I think what mediation does for people is that it allows them to think of that set of events—the crime and its aftermath—as not this all-encompassing experience that is sort of turned into stone—that fixes their identity and their subjectivity. One views one set of events in which certain things occurred—things that were traumatic and harmful and wrong, but those things do not define the entire life of those involved, whether victim or offender. This is so important because in the US criminal justice system, if you are identified as a criminal it can change your entire life, even after you serve your sentence. As a felon, you can be permanently politically disenfranchised, lose your right to vote, your chance to live in public housing, your opportunity to be employed, to take care of your own children ... You can be punished in the most absurdly extreme ways just for having been identified as a gang member in your trial or after being incarcerated. In Pelican Bay supermax prison, for example, men have been in solitary confinement for as long as thirty-five years just because the prison administration decided that they were “gang affiliated” even though their original conviction offense had nothing to do with gang membership. They are accused and punished without trial for having been assigned an identity status as a gang member by a prison guard or administrator—sometimes merely for speaking to another prisoner so identified. So, identity and subject position are part of the precarity of many peoples' lives. If you realize and acknowledge the precarity and fluidity of identity—the fluidity between victim, offender, and mediator—then it opens up so much about how people might relate to each other.

Q: That's something I've really loved about your work. Conventional documentary films and so many narrative films have a tendency to pigeon-hole each person's or character's experience, most often as an outcome of their drive to simplify their storylines. In such works, one doesn't get much understanding of the complexities; those works reduce individuals to categories, whether victim or offender. At the same time, by having different actors play different characters, emphasizing positions, you get away from certain kinds of inevitability, the kinds of stories we expect to hear. These are stories that must go the way they go, and this suggests to me that stories don't just have different endings, but also different ways they can be entered. For example, how they become enabled by the table and take shape across it.

SD: Yes, the table became the central trope or image in the piece. This partly came about through a discussion with one of the first mediators that I interviewed, this wonderful woman Kristel Buntix. She loved that I wanted her to tell stories about mediation. At first everyone else was really hesitant, "Oh, let's not talk about particular cases," and I said, "You know, talking about particular cases is going to be the way people are going to connect to it." She understood that right away and agreed with me. She told me this story, which is the one of the stories in "The Accounts" section and also figures in the introduction. She was working with a woman who had been a victim of sexual assault, a different case than the one I was referring to earlier. This young woman had basically been date gang raped in her own home when she was fifteen or sixteen. Many years later, when she was in her early thirties, she came to the idea that she wanted to have a conversation with the first of the rapists, who was her boyfriend at the time, or so she thought. He had forced her to have sex against her will and then invited all of his friends up to take turns raping her. So, fifteen years or more later, when she was having problems with sex and in her marriage, she contacted the man's mother and tried to arrange a meeting. But, he was in prison on some other offense, so she then went to the mediation service. Kristel found where he was, and went through the long process of preparing both parties for the mediation. Kristel told the woman the face-to-face meeting would take place in a legal visiting room, and the woman imagined she meant a spacious lawyer's conference room. She had the image in her mind of a long conference table where she would be at one end and he would be at the other end, but when they arrived at the prison for the visit they were taken to a tiny cramped room with a very small table, and the woman reacted violently, "No, no, I can't do this," and Kristel said, "Okay, we'll go out, and I'll see if we can get a different room and a different table, and we won't proceed unless you are comfortable with the room." So Kristel convinced the prison authorities to put them in a different room. The guards set up a much bigger table, and the woman agreed to go forward with the mediation. For me, that narrative revealed the significance of the table as a boundary object and a space where the encounter between subjects plays out. It represents the importance of both distance and proximity in the process of recovery from trauma and shame. So, I used the table as the key visual element. When one watches the introduction, one will hear reference to the notion of distance and proximity, and there are scenes where the table size is changed.

For the shoot, we brought in different sized tabletops, and we had actors move them in and out. The white tabletop gave me an opportunity to create this

Figure 2.4 The table is one of the primary metaphors in *Inside the Distance*.

one very light, almost glowing surface. It would seem to reveal the characters as they moved in and out of a pool of light from a kind of Caravaggio-esque black void. I actually saw a painting by Michael Borremans, who's a Belgian painter, at the very beginning of the period when I started working on this project. Its narrative was very ambiguous, but it depicted two men in white uniforms. They could be orderlies or they could be prisoners sitting next to a very white table. The painting is not really at all like my images in *Inside the Distance*. It's very greenish and the light is sort of muddy and soft and so forth. But when I saw the painting, I thought there's something very Belgian about it—in its quietness or sort of stillness. It glowed, but it was also very claustrophobic, because there was a sense that the light came from the surface of the table. It stuck in my head as a reference.

Q: Michael Taussig talks about this in his book, The Nervous System—the question of distance when dealing with terror and violence ... If one is too far away, one is not emotionally engaged; get too close and one risks being implicated or else making a spectacle, turning people's victimization into its own kind of pornography.

SD: Well, I definitely didn't want that, and I had to say this to the actors too. We reassured them before we started the shoot that we were not going to act out the crimes, even though in a lot of interviews that are included in "The Accounts" the crime is described by the mediator as it had been described by

the victim. So some of that voicing or description is quite difficult; especially, I think, the sexual assault cases are very difficult. I never considered acting any of that out. There's no reason to sensationalize something like that or aestheticize it. Also, what I wanted to get at was not stories of crime but stories of restoration, you know, thinking about how secondary victimization is actually part of the judicial process. We re-victimize the victim and also victimize the perpetrator or offender. I certainly don't want to make media that follows that logic, right?

A couple of the victims in this piece told me about how the process of having to testify was like a re-victimization. They didn't use that term but related what was a kind of re-victimization in the judicial process. Mediators are very concerned about secondary victimization in the process, and that is mentioned several times in the piece. The process of the criminal justice system does nothing for the victim. I think that is how many victims feel. The judicial system is based on the premise that the state takes over for the victim in the relationship to the offender by punishing the offender. But the punishment doesn't really restore the harm done to the victim. Beyond removing the potential threat of the offender remaining in society, it provides nothing for the victim unless the victim is really interested in some kind of retribution, which I don't find all that many victims are interested in. Some are. They want violence done of some sort, and they want that violence to be rationalized so it's okay so they don't have to acknowledge it as their own. I think that's the premise on which the criminal justice system is built. But, it doesn't work for most people because they're not included in any significant way in the decisions about how the offender will be punished, and they gain no further understanding about the reasons for the criminal act. Most victims want to know why? Why me? Why did this happen? What did this mean to this person who did this to me? And, most offenders want to know the same thing.

"Enactment" has practical advantages in providing anonymity, and, as some of the interviews were conducted in Flemish, allowing those to be translated and voiced. But in the end, I was just really committed to a kind of theoretical and philosophical approach. One of the mediators, Leo Van Garsse, whom I interviewed about five times, generously shared his philosophy, and he was the person who first said to me, "we are all victims, we are all offenders." I was convinced by his position, and I felt I had to design the project around that concept.

Q: Would it be fair to say that, in planning this project, you consciously chose strategies about how to structure the piece and to visualize the content using actors

to keep the focus at the level of the mediation and not on the trauma? It seems that this was strategic.

SD: Yes, that was a conscious strategy. I'm really interested in allowing people to speak, to talk about history, memory, their background in the form of a story if that's what they're interested in doing ... but the question is whether the work focuses on character and story or does it focus on a kind of analysis? I prefer to focus on *a story of analysis*. I guess that would be the right way to talk about it. I'm really, really put off by this emphasis in documentary now on the character-driven narrative. I think narrative is great; I love narratives. I watch narratives all the time, and I think that they can have a certain kind of power. But, I don't think that character-driven narrative is the way to address institutional, political, and structural issues. If you want to talk about the impact of a system, like the criminal justice system, or about structural inequality and racism, I don't think the way to effectively address those large-scale systemic issues is by telling one person's story of achievement or transformation. It seems to me in the documentary field now, particularly among those people who have for some odd reason chosen to start funding interactive documentary, there is a desire only to fund documentary and interactive documentaries that are basically about tragic or transcendent characters. To me this is such a disconnect; you don't need interactive technologies to tell single character, character-driven narratives. And, you can't effectively address issues of structural inequality and social injustice by telling stories that put the responsibility for transcending social ills onto individual characters. You need to focus on societal responsibility and the politics of structural change.

Q: This is one of powerful aspects of your work – the premise that in some ways the database is suitable for, or even a better way of, thinking about social issues.

SD: I've often said when I try to encapsulate what my methodology is, that I think of a social problem as a kind of site, rather than a story, and I want to examine that site by getting as much data and information about it as I possibly can—and, for me, that data is more subjective than objective, though I also look at statistics, and I think statistics can be very powerful. I see the set of issues or social problems, like mass incarceration, as a site or territory, say, 100 square miles. I want to map that territory by populating it with the testimony of those most impacted. Then, I want to provide access to that territory and testimony. But, instead of moving you, the viewer, or audience, from point A to point B to point C, in a kind of narrative arc, I want to drop you into that territory to let you

Figure 2.5 The interactive interface for the *Spaces* section of *Inside the Distance*.

find your own way through it and hopefully have a transformative experience that is like the transformations I experience myself in my encounters with the people who share their stories with me. So, I provide the introductions, which reveal my experience, my perspective, and what I have learned as a point of contact or a type of analysis to help you begin—a way of orienting you to the site as you begin to traverse it. I basically say:

I was here, and I got here this way. I had an encounter as a researcher, as an artist, as a human. I had an encounter with these people, and I learned this from this encounter. I'm doing the best I can to provide you with that kind of parallel type of encounter in this site, but you're going to have a different encounter because you're going to follow your own intuition, interests, direction.

Q: Ethnographic filmmakers and other visual researchers have often struggled with the balance between the immersive engagement that you describe and making the work accessible; it seems you are developing tools and approaches that help answer this difficulty.

SD: I believe that these subjects deserve really high-end design and require complex and deep data structures and information architecture. But the fancier they get, the more high definition media you have, the bigger the database and then the faster the machines have to be, etc. One way to think about the problem

is about targeted audiences. I do not really make this work for an audience of the participants. They already know this stuff. I'm interested—and I think they are interested in the same thing—in providing this material to an audience of people who don't know, and that's generally the same people who have the fancy machines, the high speed Internet access. But, I think there are more interesting questions around readership than the questions of speed and size. With entertainment you go, "ohhh entertain me" and you don't necessarily have to do any emotional work to access entertainment. It's not normally political; it doesn't require your political intellect for you to engage. That's not always the case, obviously that's a broad generalization, but I don't necessarily want to make it easy. I try to design the work so that people will want to pay attention to it, with very high-end elegant design and complex interfaces. I want to make it challenging, and I want to engage the viewer's analytical mind as well as their emotions.