

Louis Theroux

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SPOILT FOR CHOICE

Basically, [my television shows] are always about things that I am curious about. We did one about the plastic surgery industry. We did one about the police in Philadelphia. These are quite big ideas. You just sort of try to think about things that will work, that will show a side of life you don't normally see, that I can get involved with. [I want to] talk with people whose choices in some way seem odd or counterintuitive.

The most recent thing we've taped [which aired in Britain earlier this month] is about a drug called crystal meth and a city [Fresno, in California] that's been taken over by it, and the addiction, and so forth. Actually, the city's been destroyed by this drug.

CULTS AND MOBS

To some extent the tone of the programmes and the tone of the material have changed in the 10 or so years I've been doing them. In the old days, it's possible there were people who took offence but by and large the people we featured understood that there was a certain lightness to the tone of the interactions; that I was having fun with the experience of being in that world as much as anything. In the porn one, for example, I went around showing a Polaroid of myself naked.

The Westboro Baptist Church [subject of the 2007 programme The Most Hated Family in America] were fine. They loved it, to be honest with you. They loved the programme, they loved the fact that four or five million people saw the show and a number of people checked their website. You could say almost anything about them, they just want to be talked about.

I have exchanged e-mails with one of the girls who I met there because she left the group. She left the cult, if I can call it a cult. And she e-mailed me, 'Look, I'm no longer part of this religious group. Part of the reason I left was because of our conversations.'

We did one recently about crime in South Africa and the fact that there are parts of Johannesburg the police really don't go to, or if they do, they respond hours late. Law enforcement is now performed by mobs who will stone to death then burn criminals.

Usually you have an inkling about a subject that's been covered in the press. I'd never heard that justice existed in that way - in a semi-formalised way where every week, every weekend, there would be two or three lynchings. That was very surprising because I had no preparation.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

One of my favourite books is by Truman Capote. I'm a big fan of long-form non-fiction that's very compelling, has a story and is really well told. So obviously In Cold Blood was quite fun. [Other influences have been] a book called Among the Thugs by Bill Buford, which is about a guy who infiltrates the world of football hooligans. And then there was a book called Shadow Box by George Plympton, which was about his infiltration of the world of boxing, in which, at one point, he does three rounds with a world champion and gets his nose broken in the process.

Another book, called Talk of the Devil by Riccardo Orizio, is about him going and meeting ageing former dictators around the world like [Uganda's] Idi Amin, Wojciech Jaruzelski of Poland and [the wife of the former Yugoslavia's] Slobodan Milosevic. Anyway, that was also an influence, in the way that he told that.

My No1 is called My Traitor's Heart by Rian Malan, which is a memoir of a guy who grew up in South Africa and his attempts to come to terms with the racist society in which he was raised and how it formed him.

A MOST BIZARRE DAY

On my 30th birthday, I was in a self-improvement seminar in Las Vegas, which was run by a hypnotist called Marshall Sylver. The concept was he would hypnotise people into being more successful, richer. That was basically it; he kind of reprogrammes you. And he was signing people up for another programme, called the millionaire mentorship plan, through which he would turn you into a millionaire. I regarded it as sort of 75 per cent nonsense and 25 per cent was probably common-sense stuff that you didn't really need to pay to know. But something about it being my 30th birthday, being in a seminar and at one point they hypnotised me: it just all added up to a strange cocktail of experiences.

CREDIBILITY OF THE WEIRD

I see a lot of good and incredible things mixed in with the snake oil, across the board.

I got liposuction [while making one programme] and you know what? It was pretty good. I feel like I do look a bit better. I'm sort of more open to the whole plastic surgery thing. I know it can get out of hand but I might have been a little bit closed-minded about viewing people who have the surgery as shallow and the choice as kind of weird. Now I don't really feel that way.

Maybe it's the subjects I've been doing recently but I feel as though, maybe in the last three or four years, I've had my mind changed a bit more often. I did one about gambling in Vegas. I actually got sold on that as an occasional pastime.

And also the hunting one, though I didn't hunt myself specifically, but I kind of got persuaded by the argument that it is quite good for the population of wild animals if they are selectively farmed, raised and people can pay to go shoot them.

I used to say the weirdest thing about weird people is how normal they are. I tend to be surprised by how comfortable I've become in a world that, from the outside, might seem really alien and strange.

San Quentin prison, after I was there a few days, started to seem quite normal. Although it's brutal, where people get beaten up and [there are] gangs and drugs, there's a lot of warmth and a lot of affection in a very unlikely environment.

Louis Theroux specials will be shown on BBC Knowledge on Thursdays at 10pm, beginning this week.