**Screenworks submission - REWRITE**

***About the Night* Supporting Research Statement**

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**Introduction:**

This research statement explores the challenges of making *About the Night* (2023), an experimental fiction that subverts formal narrative structures. The film builds tension and atmosphere subtly, resolving in an intentionally understated way. As a researcher, I examined the collaborative process—balancing audience accessibility with artistic integrity. Influenced by radical filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha’s (1992) view of creation as an ongoing, cyclical process, I documented and critiqued my decisions emotionally and intellectually, recognising the fluid nature of knowledge and creativity.

**Research Questions:**

I aimed to critically examine the micro-level creative practises of producing and directing a fictional short film while exploring a more innovative approach to storytelling. My ambition with the film was to be daring, pushing the boundaries of form, style, and narrative structure without becoming purely experimental. This will be further explored in a forthcoming publication called *Fiction Filmmaking as Research* (Routledge 2025/26).

Primary research question:

*How can the dynamics of production be rethought to foster more innovative and inclusive storytelling?*

\*Just to note, production and creativity are inherently messy, and this research question emerged later in the process.

**Context:**

*About the Night* follows a belligerent young waiter and a woman seeking solace in a late-night café. The script was inspired by a real moment when the writer and I saw a woman staring at a piece of cake but never eating it. This memory lingered, later merging with Hemingway’s *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* (1933). Though not a direct adaptation, Hemingway’s narrative approach subtly shaped the script’s early form. Initially, I imposed Cowgill’s (2005) basic story structure—believing it essential for a strong narrative—but in hindsight, these revisions diluted the script’s poetic, experiential tone.

In pre-production, I aimed for verisimilitude, rooted in our initial empathy for the woman in the café. As the cast and crew engaged with the script, our emotional engagement deepened. My directorial approach sought to create an experiential window true to the scripts tone. However, in the edit, I recognised that the traditional storytelling conventions I had pushed for compromised the film’s integrity. To restore its essence, I returned to its experimental roots, emphasising mood and setting over plot. As the director, I faced an intricate balancing act: connecting the story to the audience, crafting a film that captures a moment in time and invites empathy for an unconventional character, all while preserving the film's integrity.

**Methods:**

I utilised a process-led reflexive praxis to explore a deeper engagement with filmmaking practices. Drawing from sociological methodology, I used an autoethnographic approach, taking field notes and conducting audiovisual interviews. As an embedded researcher, I sought to understand the key creative choices in making this film, focusing on production dynamics and fostering innovative, inclusive storytelling. If authenticity emerged through collaboration and the cast and crew’s empathetic responses, then documenting this process was essential. However, I recognise this method captures only part of the experience. I continue analysing my notes and footage, examining creative choices and barriers to experimentation, learning from mistakes while preparing my next research project.

In terms of methods, my concerns around authenticity led me back to visual anthropology, which greatly influenced my doctoral thesis. I aimed to avoid overemphasising sound, visuals, or music to dictate audience emotions, while acknowledging that nothing we create transcends representation (Trinh, 1992, p. 194). Interestingly, Trinh, does not seek authenticity in the conventional sense, but rather a 'truthfulness' in her practice (*ibid*., p. 195). I, too, was seeking a ‘truthfulness’— one rooted in collective engagement and a shared artistic vision. Her perspective, challenging fixed meanings or static truths, shaped my approach, as she asserts that '[t]o create is to understand, and to understand is to re-create' (1991, p. 194). This act of creation and the process of understanding are profoundly intertwined and reciprocal.

As a filmmaker, you are constantly working to understand the story—shaping it from words on a script to a fusion of sound and visuals that create a preserved cohesion. This aim extended to the audience, as I sought to avoid manipulating their emotional journey to arrive at some form of shared understanding. With the pandemic delaying production, we had to complete casting for our female lead via video meetings. During this process, one actor, Abigail, stood out. Her deep empathy for Mia was striking—especially when she described the moment Mia reaches for the cake but stops, feeling unworthy. Her insight revealed an emotional depth even I had not fully grasped. She also saw the script as an invitation for the audience to spend time with the characters, capturing the essence of the writer’s goal. Viewing actors as collaborators allows us to tap into their empathetic responses—they are potentially the first audience for the material. This collaborative approach enriches storytelling, deepens character portrayal, and fosters an inclusive creative process that benefits all.

This collaborative act of creation also becomes a means of comprehension, suggesting that knowledge is not just acquired passively but actively shaped through creative and empathic engagement. This dynamic extends across all production departments, where interactions with the script and the process of bringing the story to life—whether through lighting or costume—play a vital role. Trinh’s second proposition, "to understand is to re-create" (*ibid*.), suggests that understanding leads to a continuous reinterpretation of what we know. In a collaborative process, this reinterpretation happens repeatedly as creatives reach a cohesive vision. This means that shared understanding fosters a unique re-creation of the story, enabling creators to feel confident in its evolution.

Trinh’s perspective emphasises nuanced, process-oriented meaning-making—an approach that was pivotal, as the poetic nature of the script required interpretation shaped not only by collaboration, but also by the compromises inherent in production. As Trinh suggests, creation and understanding are ongoing, cyclical processes, where knowledge and creativity remain fluid and interconnected. Filmmaking, whether documentary or fiction, is therefore both an emotional and intellectual endeavour. Every act of collaboration shifts how the cast and crew perceive and transform the script into filmic language, generating new forms of creation—and, in turn, new knowledge. By working in an interdisciplinary and technical way, we innovate through the integration of intellectual, technical, and creative processes, shaping the final film.

Bolt (2006), drawing on Heidegger, argues that focusing on finished artworks overlooks the dynamic, evolving nature of the creative process. She expands the concept of "material thinking," which she defines as “a way of considering the relations that take place within the very process or tissue of making” (*ibid.*, p. 5). As she goes on to state, “the new can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice.” (*ibid.*, p. 30). So, if we consider the very delicate balance of elements that are forged through difficulties and setbacks, we can highlight how stories are created and take some of the mystery out of the process. We do not achieve this by reducing our work to purely practical elements, while making creative decisions surreptitious. 'Material thinking' can offer insights to demystify the process.

I have always preferred a non-confrontational approach to filmmaking—embracing creative friction that allows for compromise rather than conflict. On set, we faced scheduling challenges due to our need for darkness while filming in July, when daylight lingers very late in the UK. One key scene—a street argument between the waiter and his girlfriend—needed to appear as though it was dark. Despite shooting at 9pm, we couldn’t achieve a convincing ‘day for night’ look. This issue became clear during filming, but we pressed on and shot the scene. Ultimately, the entire scene had to be cut, forcing us to rework the film’s opening with the footage we had.

Rewriting in the edit is nothing new, but these compromises unexpectedly restored the film’s original intention. Though this setback was worked on for months in post-production, it led us toward a less rigid narrative structure—one that embraced the ‘window on a moment’ approach I had been pursuing from the start. In a way, it brought us back to Hemingway’s influence and the raw authenticity of the script’s earliest drafts before I introduced a more conventional structure. It could be seen as a ‘rescue’ edit, but I believe the integrity we maintained—centring on empathy and the theme of small acts of kindness are transformative—allowed us to innovate and create the story we ultimately told.

Engaging with the complexity of filmmaking requires a dynamic interplay of knowledge, understanding and intuition. While this concept isn't new—Eisenstein described filmmaking as a blend of creative vision, intellectual analysis, and emotional engagement—few have fully explored its implications further. This project is only scratching the surface, and further research is needed to uncover more about these complex processes.

**Outcomes:**

Through a reflexive process, I can now articulate that the role of uncertainty, chance, and risk, as noted by Stoneman (2012), cannot be underestimated as this is what fosters innovation. The production process is not only complex, prone to friction and disruptions, but also highly precarious for all who dare to participate. Often viewed as alchemy—a fusion of talent, craft, and serendipity—this research calls for rethinking the practice and pedagogy of filmmaking to foster more diverse and inclusive stories on our screens.

Despite challenges and compromises, *About the Night* is an outcome that pushes the boundaries of storytelling form and achieves authenticity through collaborative negotiation. It marks the first phase of my research, capturing the material negotiations that honour the story and the writer's intent. The outcome is greater than the sum of its parts.

In rethinking filmmaking practices, I have concluded that creativity is often constrained by conventional storytelling structures and industrial production practices. The time available for experimentation has been eroded by financial pressures, while film sets have increasingly become competitive and high-pressure environments where only certain types of creatives can thrive. Rather than fostering productive friction—the kind of creative tension that drives meaningful collaboration—conflict is too often tolerated or even encouraged. Shifting towards a more collaborative model can enable filmmakers to push creative boundaries while still working within the practical limitations of production. I have learnt so much from making this film, however, there is more work to be done to fully articulate how we can foster more innovative and inclusive production practices.

Recognising that conventional storytelling—particularly the monolithic Hero’s Journey—can limit innovation is only the first step. The real challenge lies in critically examining how filmic stories are developed and created, rather than reinforcing the idea that all narratives must conform to a single formula (Hanney, 2024). From there, we must explore how to foster collaboration in ways that encourage true creative risk-taking—embracing both the daring and the perilous, as Stoneman (2012) advocates, to forge new cinematic possibilities.

**Impact:**

*About the Night* contrasts with traditional narrative structures that lead to a dramatic climax, instead favouring a more atmospheric, open-ended, or emotionally restrained resolution. This approach is often found in slow cinema, experimental film, and ambient music, where mood and tone take precedence over conventional plot progression, using friction to create tension rather than relying on traditional conflict. As an embedded researcher, I aimed to understand key creative choices throughout this journey—and I continue to do so as I develop my research. Working beyond the limitations of industry norms allowed me to let go of traditional storytelling and embrace innovation.

Screening *About the Night* has elicited mixed reactions; some found it revelatory, while others were uncertain of its meaning. Feedback on *About the Night* highlighted its 'anticlimactic/ambient build and release,' affirming its resistance to conventional narrative peaks. This response aligns with my intent to craft a film that prioritises mood, subtlety, and emotional nuance over traditional dramatic resolution. In embracing this approach, the film fosters a quieter yet resonant engagement with its theme.

This practice-led approach has exceeded my initial expectations, offering valuable insights into fiction film production. Moving forward, I aim to deepen my understanding of how to break free from conventional constraints and foster a more inclusive, innovative approach to storytelling in film.

**WORD COUNT: 1,998**

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