

## **Rebellious Research Seminar, Oct 2024**

### ***Exploring the Intellectual Dimensions of Fiction Filmmaking: Why Fiction Filmmaking Matters***

Script (I am 'off the cuff' at times)

#### **AIMS FOR THIS SEMINAR:**

- Share my fiction filmmaking research as rebellious
- To discuss being a practice-led researcher, embedded in a production as a director/producer of this short film *About the Night* (2023)
- Play a clip from the film
- To illustrate how this kind of research is messy but essential

#### **INTRODUCTION**

- I am an independent filmmaker, researcher, and educator
- I am focusing in on the making of fiction
- In terms of making and teaching - I have worked across documentary and fiction
- Originally started out in radio, which meant blending both
- *About the Night* is part of a larger practice-led research project with 2 more shorts films
- I am focusing on the process of fiction production and its implications particularly around equality and inclusion as well as pushing the boundaries of storytelling within narrative film
- This research is still on going and therefore today represents part of a much bigger series of outputs including a co-edited book on *Fiction Filmmaking as Research*
- In terms of *About the Night*, I utilised a process-led reflexive praxis, which I will continue to use
- My overall objective is to explore and foster a deeper engagement within the academy around fiction filmmaking
- One of my aims with this particular film was to be more daring with the storytelling pushing the boundaries of form, style, and narrative structure without becoming purely experimental
- Being rebellious and taking creative risks is not easy particularly in fiction filmmaking

- We are often constrained by limited resources and industry gatekeepers, which I feel leads to the perpetuation of formulaic storytelling and limits the diversity of the stories we tell

## THE POWER OF FICTION

- Patricia Leavy's book - *Fiction as Research Practice*:
- “Fiction is a wonderful tool for getting at the complexity of lived experience and helping others to learn and feel” (2016: 37)
- Hopefully today I will present you with my argument for why fiction filmmaking has academic research value as it is intellectually critical work if we are producing something original

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- I aimed to explore the creative process of producing and directing a fictional short film, while also challenging the conventional view that fiction lacks academic research value
- Working in a professional manner but outside an industrial context, my goal was to identify barriers to innovation during the creative process
- One of my Initial research question was:
  - *How can the dynamics of the production process be rethought to broaden creative leadership in fiction filmmaking and foster more innovative and inclusive storytelling?*
- Just to note – being so clear about research questions was not how I started out – they formulate over time and you somehow figure out how you are articulating yourself more succinctly
- I also aimed to explore how filmmakers who challenge existing norms to tell stories from diverse perspectives might achieve their goals
- My starting point stemmed from an awareness that not everyone aspiring to become a key creative in fiction filmmaking—no matter how talented—will have the opportunity to establish a successful career, especially if they pursue projects that push creative boundaries
- Additionally, given that even arthouse cinema adheres to traditional storytelling norms these days despite occasional breakthroughs, a second question arose as I continually tried to work out how to shape this research:

- *How can we break free from conventional constraints to encourage a more inclusive and innovative approach to filmic storytelling?*

### **Immensely complex product**

- Films, whether we are talking documentary or fiction are **immensely intricate** artefacts to create, as those of you who are involved in production will know, they encompass a **spectrum of challenges** from the development of an idea, right through to the **final** product.

QUOTE - “A film is an **immensely complex** product, **integrating** numerous art forms (such as writing, design, and performing arts), and the scope for combining the inputs in order to achieve new **content varieties** are, in Caves’s (2000) words, **infinite**.”

- What interests me in this quote from Lorenzen’s is, although film production is **complex**, it offers scope for new **content creation** with **infinite** potential.
- However, I want to suggest that, within **narrative fiction**, as it stands right now, there is limited room for **experimentation** or **different creative** voices.
- **And** if fiction reflects our ideals, fears, and aspirations, as a society, it is essential to understand the **creative processes** and **working practices** that shape these **artefacts**.
- **Emerging filmmakers**, often lacking reputation or resources, face a landscape that favours the **formulaic** and **predictable narratives**.
- And despite those stand out films, a narrow view of **storytelling** with fiction filmmaking **prevails**.

### **ABOUT THE NIGHT 1**

#### **Story:**

Is about a belligerent young waiter and a woman seeking solace in a late-night café

#### **Theme:**

Small acts of kindness can change the world

- *About the Night* is about a belligerent young waiter and a woman seeking solace in a late-night café

- The theme underlying this story is that small acts of kindness can change the world
- The script was inspired by a real event the writer and I witnessed—a woman unable to eat a piece of cake in a café
- This moment stayed with us, and months later, after the writer read Ernest Hemingway's *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* (1933), these two things became the building blocks that inspired the story and the storytelling
- In the early stages of developing the script, the writer experimented with the narrative, navigating the best way to articulate his interaction with what he'd seen in the cafe and what had moved him in the Hemingway short story
- When I became involved to develop the story it was a labour of love, not formal research, but eventually I recognised the value of understanding this whole process and began shaping it as research
- As the director, I approached production wanting to create a sense of verisimilitude, grounded in our initial empathetic response to the woman in the cafe
- This approach continue to shape how I worked with both cast and crew as we collectively engaged with the script

## **ABOUT THE NIGHT 2**

- The pandemic delayed production and prevented us from casting the female lead in person
- After numerous video meetings, Abigail stood out — her empathy for the character was remarkable
- When she expressed how deeply she felt Mia's loneliness and pain — it illuminated an emotional depth I hadn't fully grasped at that point
- Looking back at my notes she described the script as an invitation for the audience to spend time with the characters, which captured the essence of what I was trying to achieve – something that only now I am coming to understanding about my own drive to make films

### **ABOUT THE NIGHT 3**

- As a director, I wanted to create an experiential window on a moment that matched the tone of the story.
- Although my perspective on the story differed somewhat from the writer's, our collaboration felt productive.
- While the script read beautifully—more poetic than narrative-driven—I pushed for revisions toward a more conventional structure with a clear protagonist.
- The writer resisted at first, but we negotiated and compromised and eventually worked-in a more conventional structure
- However, midway through editing I realised that the traditional storytelling conventions were compromising the film's integrity,
- and while not a direct adaptation of Hemingway, the film needed to share its more experimental nature with an emphasis on mood and setting rather than 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.
- While I regret my insistence on conventional narrative structures it proved to be a valuable learning experience .

### **RESEARCH METHODS 1**

- I utilised a **process-led reflexive praxis** to explore a deeper engagement for myself with filmmaking practices.
- Drawing methodology from my sociology background at undergrad, masters and PhD.
- I used an autoethnographic approach, taking field notes and conducting audiovisual interviews.
- However, being an **embedded researcher** and filmmaker comes with its challenges.

- This method only captures part of the experience – nothing can capture the whole of it.
- But, I continually draw from the fragments of data, as well as my own memory as that embedded researcher, and also by interacting with other scholars work and audience engagement with the film.
- Through this dynamic reflexive approach, I am critically engaging with concerns around the relationship between collaborators and myself within the production environment.
- As the researcher I aimed to capture and understand the key creative choices I made throughout this production.
- As a director, my priority was to achieve authenticity through fostering a connection with the cast and crew as we made creative decisions.
- Crucially, I sought to avoid manipulating the audience's emotional journey and present a moment in time for the audience to take-in.
- In terms of methods, my concerns around authenticity led me back to visual anthropology, which greatly influenced my doctoral thesis.
- I aimed to avoid overemphasizing sound, visuals, or music to dictate audience emotions, while acknowledging that nothing we create transcends representation (Trinh, 1992, p. 194).
- Experimental filmmaker Trinh T. Minha-Ha, does not seek authenticity in the conventional sense, but rather a 'truthfulness' in her practice (ibid., 195).
- For those of you who do not know her work, Trinh comes out of a documentary tradition but blurs the lines between documentary and a more poetic representation in her films.

## RESEARCH METHODS 2

- Trinh's background in visual anthropology, filmmaking, and literature shapes her approach.
- as she challenges traditional ethnographic practices and emphasizes the limitations and subjectivity inherent in representation.
- Trinh is critiquing the authority of objective observation, within documentary practice, advocating instead for a dialogic, relational perspective.
- "I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby" – this has shaped how I operate as a director.

- But how does this help me articulate my practice in fiction filmmaking?
- It was this notion of dialogic and speaking near-by rather than dictating, which intrigued me.
- Her filmmaking is grounded in embodied experience and self-reflection.
- So many aspects of her work deeply resonate with me .
- 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: 194).
- This act of creation and the process of understanding are profoundly intertwined and reciprocal.
- I come at this in a different way – thinking about the way we create meaning when working with fiction.

### RESEARCH METHODS 3

- This collaborative act of creation becomes a means of comprehension, suggesting that knowledge is not just acquired passively but actively shaped through creative 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 of the story.
- In a collaborative process, this reinterpretation happens repeatedly as creatives reach a **preserved cohesive vision**.
- This means that understanding, when shared, leads to a unique re-creation of the story the writer was trying to articulate.

### RESEARCH METHODS 4

- Trinh's perspective emphasises nuanced, process-oriented meaning-making, and this was pivotal for me, as the poetic nature of the script required an

interpretation shaped not only by myself, but by the collaborative decisions, but also by the compromises inherent in working within the means of production.

- For Trinh, creation and understanding are ongoing, cyclical processes, suggesting that knowledge and creativity are fluid and interconnected in every part of the process.
- Understanding that every act of collaboration shifts how we perceive and present a story leading to new forms of creation, therefore, new knowledge.
- Making the film itself an output.

### **CLIP: *About The Night***

- *About the Night* centres on Josh, this young waiter, as he ends his shift.
- As mentioned, my **goal** was to create an engaging narrative that captures life's complexities without **adhering** to a **conventional** conflict-resolution arc.
- The tension is evident when Mia enters as Josh is closing for the night, yet there is no overt conflict, even when Mia avoids eye contact and communicates only through writing.
- The **subtle shifts** in Josh's behaviour—from initial **annoyance** to **acceptance**, influenced by his **desire** to emulate his mentor, Elijah—underscore a narrative that **unfolds** without a **dramatic catalyst**.
- With the focus on minimal manipulation, **fostering empathy** without dictating **audience emotions**, the sonic elements had to be carefully thought through, as it needed to enhance rather than compensate for the **absence of conflict**.

### **REFLEXIVE PROCESS 1**

- Barbara Bolt (2004), drawing on Heidegger, argues that the traditional emphasis on completed artworks rather than on the practice itself creates a significant gap in our understanding of art as a dynamic, evolving process.
- Bolt introduces 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."
- As I have said, filmmaking is inherently complex, marked by numerous points where the process can be disrupted or compromised.



- By critically examining these complexities, we gain a deeper appreciation of the collaborative dynamics, the stressful resource-intensive nature of production, and then the critical question becomes, who is afforded the opportunity to take on these leading creative roles, particularly the role of the director.

## REFLEXIVE PROCESS 2

- Through this reflexive process, I can now start to fully understand and articulate the whole experience.
- Something really striking was how the role of **uncertainty, chance, and risk**, as noted by Stoneman (2012), shaped the process and therefore the story (I will come back to this in a moment).
- With the production process being so complex, prone to **friction** and disruptions, filmmaking is a highly precarious venture for all who dare to participate.
- Often seen as a form of alchemy—a fusion of innate talent, craft skills, and serendipity—this research calls for a rethink of our approach to both the practice and pedagogy of filmmaking.
- While this mystique can create intrigue, it ultimately proves unhelpful, perpetuating the 'cult of the director' and overshadowing the collaborative efforts crucial to production.
- 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.
- And to date I feel this project is only scratching the surface, with lots more to uncover about these complex processes.
- Engaging with filmmaking's complex components requires a dynamic interplay of knowledge, understanding and intuition.

## REFLEXIVE PROCESS 3

- Since creativity and understanding are deeply intertwined in filmmaking, it's crucial to recognize that the intricate creative and technical decisions involved come with costs, not just in terms of finances or reputation, but emotional as well.

- This research continues highlighting to me that the deeply embedded collaborative nature of film production needs constant revision to understand the complexities of the production situation.
- This project has allowed me to articulate what I previously understood intuitively, making both the film and this articulation valuable outcomes in their own right.
- I have also come to understand that emphasis on the 'creative voice' in filmmaking, reinforces an elitist structure, limiting diverse content creation.
- The auteur theory promotes the idea that a singular artistic vision defines a film as art, but this is restrictive, relying on problematic criteria for who qualifies.
- Both Pearlman (2023) and Shambu (2023) note that this emphasis on the auteur promotes a colonial and Eurocentric approach to production and prioritises individualism and hierarchical control over the collaborative creativity involved in much of filmmaking particularly in a Western context.
- This is where the concept of risk becomes a major factor as the ongoing process of refining and reimagining brings untold risk, therefore limiting opportunities even before exploring innovative storytelling.
- Stoneman states, “We need to encourage and maximise the dynamic of the daring, the possibilities of the perilous, in order to enable the realisation of new images and sounds that may contribute to social and cultural transformation” (2012, p. 266).
- Stoneman advocates for "dangerous creation" to foster new, transformative work, but this approach often clashes with the priorities of industry and raises questions about the use of 'creative voice' within a pedagogical context.
- What was revealed to me through this journey is that filmmaking is risky and in so many more ways than I had understood.

#### **REFLEXIVE PROCESS 4**

- *About the Night* was made in a relatively safe environment, yet most filmmakers lack this security.
- What this research highlights is that filmmaking is inherently marked by setbacks, with critical moments emerging as story needs are balanced against real-world constraints.
- Each contributor must negotiate and refine their contributions to achieve the final product.

- To remove barriers for aspiring filmmakers, it's not only about providing adequate knowledge and training, but also about creating safe working environments that understand and mitigate the high risks, allowing promising creatives to thrive and gain professional opportunities.
- We need to fully understand production dynamics to challenge existing practices and foster innovation beyond the dominant auteur approach, emulating industry within our pedagogy is not the necessarily answer.

## **DYNAMICS OF FRICTION 1**

- As I have mentioned, my primary objective as the director was to depict fictional events with minimal manipulation, aiming to foster empathy without imposing emotions on the audience.
- Rather than striving for a naturalistic representation, my approach was to construct an experiential window that mirrored the evocative tone of the script, inviting viewers into a subtly crafted moment.
- This seemingly restrained approach to fiction was not indented to merely document a moment, my aim was to experiment with narrative filmic form.
- While the term friction had not been employed in the context of my research from the start, it has emerged as an apt descriptor for the challenges inherent in both the collaborative creative process, and in understanding the driving force behind the narrative conventions employed in this story.
- So, here I want to briefly focus on the notion of friction as an alternative to the notion of conflict.
- Conflict is a narrative cornerstone to storytelling and continues to be a key component that shapes narratives and engages audiences by creating tension, suspense, and resolution.
- Although friction and conflict are related concepts, they are often used interchangeably, however, they are distinct.
- Conflict typically refers to a more intense and direct clash or disagreement between parties.
- It frequently involves opposing interests, goals, or values, which, within a narrative, typically culminate in overt confrontation, hostility, or struggle.
- Whereas friction generally refers to tension, disagreement, or resistance between individuals or groups.

- As opposed to conflict, friction can be relatively mild and may not necessarily escalate into open confrontation or hostility.
- However, we taught that conflict is the only way a story can be formed.
- My aim with this film was to experiment with the narrative of the story creating friction rather than conflict.

(breath)

## DYNAMICS OF FRICTION 2

- Critically assessing the collaborative process of creating this film requires reflexivity about the inherent difficulties in bringing something new to life.
- Friction, often seen as a **hindrance**, can be a powerful driver of creativity and innovation.
- Despite the desire for a smooth process, filmmaking is invariably marked by setbacks; our most significant was the pandemic, which halted production for over a year, and profoundly impacting the crew, cast and the final artefact.
- As a director, every **creative decision** is a negotiation with collaborators, constantly balanced against story needs and budget constraints, leading to **inevitable compromises**.
- This dynamic, where creativity, content, and compromise intersect, underscores the perpetual presence of friction within the **collaborative process**.
- It also highlights the pressures directors face in **high-stakes environments**, influencing who can take on the role and what kind of stories are told.
- A risk-averse culture stifles creative possibilities, narrowing the scope of what gets made.
- Recognizing and embracing the collaborative nature of filmmaking—including its inherent frictions—is crucial to preserving a film's **radical potential** and resisting a single, dominant **auteur perspective**.

## EMBEDDED RESEARCHER

- As an embedded researcher, I aimed to understand key creative choices throughout this journey.

- Working reflexively allowed me to let go of traditional storytelling and embrace new innovative forms.
- Screening *About the Night* has generated mixed reactions; some found it revelatory, while others were unsure of its meaning.

### **THE CARRIER BAG THEORY OF FICTION**

- Just recently I have come to realise the story aligns more closely with *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Le Guin, 1988), which emphasises collective experiences over individual heroics.
- Initially, I adhered to conventional narratives, but staying true to the material gave me the confidence to follow my instincts and embrace the writer's vision.
- Gradually, we embraced the film's feel, creating an open, less prescriptive narrative.
- This practice-led research has exceeded my initial expectations, offering valuable insights into fiction film production.
- In the next stage of this project, I need to better understand how to break free from conventional constraints and encourage a more inclusive and innovative approach to storytelling in film.

### **REFLEXIVE PROCESS**

- Despite challenges and compromises, *About the Night* is also the research outcome as it 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, and its resonance with audiences is becoming clearer.

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