

Research Statement - *The Staircase*

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Research Questions:

The Staircase is a Middlesex University funded project that began with the following research questions:

How is it possible to make a film with naturalistic performances that evoke a character's internal state of mind?

Referencing both drama and documentary, how can this naturalistic approach be set up and supported and then subverted by the cinematic form?

The starting point in terms of performance was the use of the Stanislavski System and later works by Katie Mitchell and Judith Western. The investigation here was to learn about these texts in more detail and explore them in practice, collaborating with different performers in different ways to achieve a range of results.

The secondary starting point was the construction of film itself and how this form could be used to support the naturalistic content and approach and then how this form could then subvert the content and play with it further.

To do this, I needed to consider certain storytelling conventions and in deciding to write a script I considered the idea of the hero's journey and its implications. The work is also very interested in taking a carefully considered cinematic approach in the lighting and coverage and in the use of stillness, static camera and off-screen space.

The original idea came to me in 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown, perhaps as a response to the focus on our mental health (Government UK, 2022). The thought that I found most helpful was that it's not so much the situation that we find ourselves in but more about our response to it, with an emphasis on resilient, positive thinking.

Hence the interest in truthfully evoking a character's internal state of mind, with endlessly cycling feelings of hope and anxiety both positive and negative thoughts.

Context / Significance:

My personal context is that I trained in Cinematography and worked freelance on a very wide range of productions for 23 years, with the last 8 plus years in academia. As a DP, I lit and shot many of Gillian Wearing's films and a key influence for me is many of these projects between 1997 and 2012. I am particularly taken by the idea of blurring drama and documentary and notions of truth.

Some key references are *10 – 16* (1997) which combines the visuals of adult actors performing and lip-synching to documentary style interviews with children aged 10 to 16, which are intimate, confessional, and self-revelatory in nature and greatly in juxtaposition with the actors 'performing' their voices. *2 into 1* (1997) uses a similar technique.

I also find *Drunk* (1999), *Snapshot* (2005), *Confessions: Portraits, Videos* (2009), and *Shakespeare's Confessions* (2012), very relevant in terms of blending aspects of documentary with a more performative, dramatic approach. The work is also often interested in masks and the split between our internal world of thoughts and what we present externally.

We shot these films, often on Super 16mm, with a static camera and often quite durationally long takes as the action is allowed to develop before us, as different elements of the films undercut one another, play with what is constructed and what is 'real', yet nevertheless have a sense of 'truth' to them.

I'm then reminded of *Being John Malkovich* (1999), then David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), where the same piece of script is firstly rehearsed by two characters, one practising for a casting, which is then performed in the casting. The first one set it up which is then undercut and reframed by the second, while they are both 'true' to the story.

In the references outlined above, I think that one of the keys to the films being successful is that the performances have to be completely naturalistic so that we 'believe' them, so that once a film has set something up, it then has the power of being able to subvert this and confound or surprise our expectations.

I'm also interested in alternative approaches with more stylised and symbolic performances, particularly through dance. A key reference here is *The Statement* (2016), by choreographer Crystal Pite, as the dancers more abstract performance is juxtaposed with the naturalism of the characters voices from Jonathan Harvey's script.

The idea of symbolism in film, art and theatre is relevant here as is the desire to represent absolute human truths symbolically and metaphorically rather than in absolute realistic likeness, with the idea of wanting to 'evoke' rather than 'describe' emotions. Particular symbolic references include the German expressionistic film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) and much of Frieda Kahlo's work is in the way that they so viscerally evoke emotion.

My practise-based research has always been interested in the construction of film, the representation of time and space, storytelling and the evoking of emotion. *The Staircase* is part of a progressing body of work, working with performers in naturalistic and more symbolic ways, which reflects my personal journey as a filmmaker becoming more interested in theatrical techniques and how they pertain to film.

I hope to progress work in this area by exploring three different performance approaches to the same material; questioning how the cinematic form can both

support and subvert this through considered cinematography, mise-en-scene and postproduction.

Methods:

My methodology was to make a short drama, created in a steady manner between 2020 to 2024. I used the convention of the hero's journey and reframed this with a female protagonist to write a script. I was aware of Stanislavski's ideas, particularly on emotional memory and the 'magic if' because as a director we really want the actor to put themselves in the character's situation to achieve a naturalistic performance. Therefore, I wrote the script as an actor at a casting as I calculated that they would be able to clearly relate to this.

The film shoots logistics were very sustainable as I did a lot of the crewing myself with equipment and locations at Middlesex University, allowing me to budget for the cast and most necessary crew.

I used the script as a starting point and asked the prospective actors to do self-tapes improvising a minute or so, evoking the change in emotions through an 'emotional event' in the script. (Weston 2021 p.26). My original idea was that the character would look off camera at the interviewing director, but as I received the actors' self-tapes, it was obvious to me that their direct address to camera was much more powerful.

I created a graphic which showed a profile of 'the hero's journey' which I found very useful in being able to improvise the ideas. These shoots were very much informed by Judith Weston's ideas of not being interested in quick results but in foregrounding the process with both depth and detail to the character. (Weston 2021 pp72-133)

I edited this resulting in *The Staircase* 13 mins (later becoming Part One). The edit was very much informed by Walter Murch's ideas in trying to do 'the most with the least' (2001 p.15) and in prioritising emotion in the choice of cuts, jump cutting across time as I foregrounded the flow of engaging emotion.

Further research led to a weekend course on directing actors in the context of Katie Mitchell's *The Director's Craft*. I was keen to explore this newfound knowledge particularly in terms of text analysis and notably 'events' (2009 p.55) and 'intentions' (2009 p.62)

Using the transcript of part one, I shot part two, this time as a rehearsal process with two different actors: one playing the positive thoughts and one the more negative thoughts. This was a very enlightening process, and I was very impressed with the skills, talent and speed of the actors to improvise and perform this script in only the five hours we had on set.

On further reflection, I shot a third example, this time working with a choreographer and dancers to reinterpret the voice through movement, often using more freeing, full-length shots. Here we used the naturalistic voice with the more stylised

performance yet still using the principles of directing actors which I found to be very successful even in this dance context.

The final postproduction process was greatly informed by Murch's ideas on the hierarchy of the edit, and foregrounding emotion and on John Yorke's thoughts on the structure, midpoint and shaping the narrative. (Yorke, 2013)

The many, many rough-cuts went through multiple screenings and greatly benefitted from a wide range of feedback from friends, family, students and colleagues.

Outcomes:

The research project has resulted in two films:

The Staircase - 29 minutes 50 seconds 4k Stereo and 4kDCP, 5.1 surround sound

The Casting - 7 minutes 45 seconds 4k Stereo and 4kDCP, 5.1 surround sound

Where I hope that the work is original, is in exploring three different performance approaches to the same material, presented filmically.

Perhaps Part One is the most successful in evoking the character's internal state of mind as it achieves a naturalistic performance, which appears to be some sort of documentary or documentation, with simple coverage yet high production value lighting. This performance comes across as 'real' and 'truthful' as we empathise with the character's situation. Only towards the end do we realise that it is not what we thought, as the naturalistic approach to performance has been used to set up and then subvert itself.

As the construction has been made visible, Part Two continues in this vein as one of the actors questions what the process actually is. At this point, I feel we are really capturing the actor's state of mind as he grapples with the task ahead, and the behind the scenes feel of the footage lends authenticity to this moment. From then on, Part Two, feels like a documentation of the rehearsal process, where we know that it is constructed as the actors develop their performance. By the end, they have a strong naturalistic performance, yet given what we have seen previously, we are primed to admire the performance rather than really feel for the characters evoking their internal state of mind.

Part Three does not attempt naturalistic performances but uses the naturalistic style of the voice to anchor more stylised and symbolic movement. By now, we are fully aware of the construction of the film we are watching so we don't 'believe' that the characters really have this state of mind but are instead performing or demonstrating these feelings. This puts the viewer in a different position, as it could be argued that the performance doesn't actually *evoke* a character's internal state of mind, but simply demonstrates this, encouraging a more distanced and reflective engagement from the viewer, based more on admiring the interpretive performance rather than feeling for the character.

In terms of the construction of film itself, certain conventions have indeed been re-worked and re-used as these constructed conventions are not natural but can be reframed from differing perspectives. I've taken the idea of the hero's journey and followed its form, but instead of an individual male hero, the hero is a female and is played by five different performers of differing genders and heritage with a sense of differing perspectives, as five performers symbolise one character. This is successful as far as it goes but is limited by its still Anglo-Western storytelling and cultural approach. This is a limitation of the research and something that would be good to research further. (Hambly, 2021)

The attention to detail in the cinematography, sound and postproduction, (Murch, 2001,p.15) and the use of simple coverage, stillness, static camera and off-screen space is an attempt to encourage the viewer to not be just a passive viewer but an active participant in the meaning, as the work demonstrates how the play between form and content, can effectively support one another to set something up, then subvert it, and undercut it, whilst at the same time, containing an essence of truth as it moves between our perception of documentary and drama, filmic construction and notions of truth.

I hope that one of the impacts of the work is a consideration that for us to perceive a film as having elements of truth to it, this does not require it to have only one mode of telling, as there can successfully be multiple modes.

Impact:

My practice is encouraging further cross-collaboration between film, dance and performing arts both internal and external to Middlesex University. Also, the modest budget and use of MDX facilities demonstrates a very sustainable model of filmmaking.

In 2023 and 2024, the work-in-progress *The Staircase* and *The Casting* were presented at the International Network of Experimental Fiction Film Festival and conference. As such, this has been a wonderful opportunity to share and disseminate the work. Both films received IMDB credits and Honourable Mentions from the Athens International Monthly Film Festival and *The Casting* was also screened and presented at the Boreal Screendance Film Festival 2024.

The work has been instrumental in my own continuing professional development and the created materials, experience and knowledge are continuing to inform my current and future teaching. This has benefits outside of academia, especially as I am both one of the mentors and jurors of the Earth Photo exhibition from the Royal Geographic Society with IBG. (Royal Geographic Society, 2025)

The films are continuing their journey towards further academic conferences and festivals.

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