A CINEMA OF HAPPENINGS

Exploring Improvisation as Process in Filmmaking

Will Howe

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ABSTRACT

This thesis supports a practice-based-research project that examines differing methodologies of improvisation across the production of four film exercises: *Fallen Angels* (2005), *Blood Offering* (2005), *Birdman* (2009) and *The Graduate Workshop* (2010). By investigating the 'materiality' of improvisation within my filmmaking practice, bearing in mind that between the performer and the finished film there are inherent production processes that both finesse and obfuscate the improvised performance, I seek to address a fundamental question 'to what extent are the footprints of improvisation visible within the performance and aesthetics of film production?'

This study brings together a number of ideas about improvisation practice, as evidenced in the work of Mike Leigh (*Abigail's Party*, 1977, *Another Year*, 2010) and Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez (*The Blair Witch Project*, 1999). I use dominant 'institutional' practice as a counterpoint to the received ideas about improvisation. This research is further informed by new materials, specifically, an interview with Penny Woolcock (*Tina Goes Shopping*, 1999, *Death of Klinghoffer*, 2003) as well as analysis of my own practice.

Where existing accounts of improvisation have principally sought to define this as a phenomenology within the context of theatre and live performance, this study identifies distinct 'models' of improvisation process in relation to filmmaking. In comparing different production approaches, on a project-by-project basis and by referencing other filmmaker's processes, the thesis proposes a paired down schema for future work; identifying clear points for developing and containing character, as well as recommending a structured approach for developing narrative and filming. This project makes a distinct contribution to the study of improvisation in film, by drawing attention to the importance of methodology in practical filmmaking.

CONTENTS

Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise.

In the opening lines of *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1999)[1] Viola Spolin boldly declares that, "Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise" (1999: 3). Although her challenge particularly relates to the context of working in the theatre and classroom, I have appropriated Spolin's 'call to action' as an invitation to actors, non-actors and directors who are undertaking improvisation for the camera.

From the outset, I would not wish to suggest that the 'institutional[2]' practice of using a script to inform character is a flawed process; or that improvisation techniques always yield great success, particularly as my own research evidences varied results in this area. Rather, this study recognizes improvisation as an alternative approach to mainstream filmmaking practices, an approach that empowers the actor and facilitates character and narrative development at the point of production. This is the tangible exploration of process that, on one hand, experiments with unstructured and unrehearsed improvisation, through to work that has been aided by a script, but that uses improvisation as a way of developing and fine-tuning a performance.

As will become apparent, my practical exercises have made extensive use of the untrained film actor. In part, this suited me for economic reasons and benefits of accessibility

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[1] First published in 1963, Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1999) is a seminal text offering hundreds of exercises that explore different aspects and techniques of improvisation, including workshop exercises for developing character, emotion, staging, use of the body etc... In many ways it has been instrumental to many practitioners in opening up a dialogue about improvisation. It is didactic in tone with a clear practical emphasis.

[2] Throughout this thesis I make reference to 'institutional' processes of production. In doing so, I am acknowledging both the production and business practices that underpin mainstream narrative filmmaking, as proposed by Noel Burch's concept of Institutional Modes of Representation (IMR) in *Theory of Film Practice* (1981), and explanations of Classical Hollywood cinema defined by Bordwell & Thompson in *Film Art* (2010: 458-461)

and planning the filming schedules. However, more significantly, I felt that the 'trained' film actor would come to the process with preconceived notions of how to create a character and perform for the camera. In doing so, one of the features central to the purpose of this investigation would be compromised. I surmised that there existed a range of actors who would be suited to my intended research, from those with no acting experience whatsoever through to actors whose experience was limited to theatre. My primary task, which shall be discussed in due course, was to find people who were not adverse to pretending and performing in public.

In cinema, one can find many examples of the untrained and non-professional actor delivering highly competent screen performances albeit Lamberto Maggiorani[3] in *Bicycle Thieves* [De Sica, 1948], Martin LaSalle in *Pickpocket* (Bresson, 1959) or Kelli Hollis in *Tina Goes Shopping* [Woolcock, 1999]. Whether or not use of the 'non-actor', as termed by director Robert Bresson (1977:5), might be driven by the quest for an 'authenticity' and a different kind of performance truth not found in the work of the trained actor, is undoubtedly a consideration that will be addressed through this thesis.

The exercises that define this practice-based-research (PBR) comprise *Fallen Angels* (2005) and *Blood Offering* (2005), both of which could be thought of as 'happenings'[4],

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[3] Lamberto Maggiorani plays the unemployed father (Antonio Ricci) in Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). One day, whilst hanging posters on the city walls. Antonio's bicycle, his sole means of earning an income, is stolen. Together with his son, Bruno, the narrative follows Antonio as he journeys through the post-war 'ruined' city of Rome in search of the missing bicycle. This film, a significant example of 'neorealist' cinema, is often cited as a fine example of De Sica's work with non-professional actors.

[4] A Happening, according to Kirby is a term '…best used in a historical way and sociological way to refer to those works created as part of the international Happenings movement of the early and mid-1960s.' (2002: 49). However, when reflecting on my early experiments with improvisation, *Fallen Angels* and *Blood Offering*, I began to think that it was possible that I had inadvertently been producing a series of 'happenings'. According to Kirby '[h]appenings made little use of acting.'(2002: 49) and he goes on to provide an example of a happening called *Mysteries and the Smaller Pieces* saying that 'the performance was without plot, story or narrative' (ibid).

wherein the performances and narratives have been generated 'in the moment' according to defined contexts and constraints. The later pieces, *Birdman* (2008) and *The Graduate Workshop* (2010), are exercises that seek to extend the written materials, to use improvisation as a way of loosening up performance and in doing so find 'impulses' and meanings for the actors. It will suffice to say that my emphasis has been to research and report on how the combination of the actor and improvisation has been explored through my filmmaking experiences. My thesis explores the creative 'dialogue' between actor and director, and comments on the development of character-led narratives, aiming to reveal how the cinematic medium interacts with the improvisation process. Through analysis of these 'captive' performances I have been investigating whether the notion of 'liveness'[5], arguably a key facet of improvisation praxis, can have a visible presence in the recorded medium.

Furthermore, 'the acting did not involve character, place or situation other than, perhaps the conditions of the Artaudian plague that was the cause of death. The actors were only themselves "dying" in the aisles and on the stage of the theatre.' (ibid: 50). In developing his view Kirby says that 'Happenings have contributed their share to the creation of a state of mind that values the concrete as opposed to the pretended or simulated and that does not require plots or stories.' (ibid: 51) In reflecting on Kirby's descriptor of the happening, one might pause to consider the extent to which current documentary forms and reality shows have much in common within this classification.

> *Under the direct influence of Happenings, among other things, every aspect of theatre in this country [US] has changed: scripts have lost their importance and performances are created collectively; the physical relationship of audience and performance has been altered in many different ways and has been made an inherent part of the piece; audience participation has been investigated; "found" spaces rather than theatres have been used for performance and several different places employed sequentially for the same performance; there has been an increased emphasis on movement and on visual imagery (not to mention a commercialised use of nudity); and so forth.* (2002: 49)

[5] 'Liveness' is a substantial debate and I have referred to Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2008) to explore ideas in relation to the proposal that improvisation helps to produce a quality of liveness and immediacy within the performance. Auslander's text provides a useful frame of reference to explore the debate of 'liveness', examining the phenomenon as a series of aesthetic considerations and intertextual referents but, also, its standing as a cultural economy in relation to mediatized forms. He says 'at the level of cultural economy, theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners' (2008:1) and regards the rivalry as not being equal, saying that television is the dominant form (ibid). It is worth noting that Auslander (see his footnotes) defines "cultural economy" as 'a realm of enquiry that includes both the real economic relations among cultural forms, and the relative degrees of cultural prestige and power enjoyed by different forms.' (ibid). Auslander treats 'live and mediatized performance as parallel forms that participate in the same cultural economy' (ibid: 5), saying that 'live performance and mediatised forms compete for audiences in the cultural marketplace, and that mediatized forms have gained the advantage in that competition.' (ibid: 6)

This research requires us to look beyond the veneer of a finished film. Of necessity it has to be practice led, because it examines the processes of creation, in other words 'the making of'; whereby importance is placed on how performances are created and how results are achieved, which clearly cannot be extrapolated from a completed film alone. From the very beginning, I was keen to understand: what performance choices are presented to the actor whilst improvising in a 'live' and 'freeform' way; what benefits and impediments does improvisation present at the point of filming through to the post-production of the narrative film; what aesthetic qualities are created through improvisation? By investigating the materiality of improvisation in my own work, bearing in mind that between the performer and the finished film there are inherent editing and layering production processes, I have essentially sought to resolve the principle question: 'To what extent are the footprints of improvisation resident within the screen performances of the actor?'

Much has been written about improvisation in relation to theatre and live performance, as evidenced in the bibliography of this thesis. However, aside from Paul Clements' *The Improvised Play: The Work of Mike Leigh* (1983) there is a dearth of written materials that examine the improvisation processes of the actor in film. To this extent, however small, I believe that this research presents an individual and distinct contribution to the area. Where appropriate, I have commented on improvisation strategies employed by other filmmakers such as Mike Leigh (*Another Year* 2010), Dan Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez (*The Blair Witch Project*, 1999) and Penny Woolcock (*Tina Goes Shopping*, 1999), showing how my PBR reacts to and embraces the ideas and practices of others within this branch of filmmaking. In bringing together these filmmakers and teachers of improvisation, situating them within a communal arena for investigation and analysis, I feel it is possible to identify a meaningful skillset and a possible methodology to assist with future research in this field.

Suggesting an approach for working with this thesis and supporting DVD materials, I would recommend that the reader starts by reading the first three chapters, as this will provide necessary explanations and contexts for my practice.

Chapter 1: The Actor's Craft introduces some key ideas about what it is to act and how we might interpret the process, pairing it down exchanges of communication.

Chapter 2. Improvising on Film: Exploring the Paradox examines a range of definitions for improvisation, considering it as a source of 'play' and a context for production. It is examined and challenged as an aesthetic form and appraised as a marketing ploy, generally something different and 'other' than the 'institutional mode of representation'. (Burch, 1981)

Chapter 3. Towards a Methodology for Improvisation Practice situates my research alongside the approaches of other practitioners and examines how and where improvisation has been used within the context of filmmaking.

Chapter 4. Practice Based Research looks at the specific examples of practice within their individual contexts. It is suggested that you approach the work section by section. Start by reading the section introduction, which comprises a context and methodology for the example of practice. Follow this up by screening the appropriate film and conclude with reading the relevant evaluation of each assignment. The supporting DVD materials are located in the appendices and labelled accordingly: Disk 1 - ***Dark Summers*** includes *Fallen Angels* (2005) and *Blood Offering* (2005). Disk 2 - ***Playing with Improvisation*** includes *Birdman Improvisations* (2008) and *The Graduate Workshop* (2010). Disk 3 - ***Learning to Fly***, includes *Birdman* (2008).

Chapter 1: The Actor's Craft

Before examining the differences between live and filmed improvisation, it is worth pausing to consider the actor's craft in relation to improvisation. Philip Auslander states that as '...semioticians who have studied acting have discovered, the performing actor is an opaque medium, an intertext, not a simple text to be read for 'content'. (2002: 54) In the sense that acting can be regarded as projecting multiple interpretations and layers of 'the self', then seeing the actor as an intertext becomes a valuable concept to hold on to. Fundamentally, acting is an ephemeral process and improvisation is often situated as that which adds another layer and is a means of further codifying the actor's communication exchanges. Joseph Chaikin has written that "Acting is a demonstration of self with or without a disguise" (cited in Auslander 2002: 54), whereas Michael Kirby states that 'If the performer does something to simulate, represent, impersonate and so forth, he or she is acting' (2002: 43). For him, acting appears 'At the point at which the emotions are "pushed" for the sake of the spectators.' [ibid]. However, neither definitions of acting are particularly robust, and the citation from Chaikin does not acknowledge the need for disguise or representation, and Kirby does not identify the needs of 'the self' in relation to the process. I therefore propose a compromise in relation to these definitions, suggesting that acting may be regarded as the projection of the imagined self; a re-articulation of the self, part conscious and part subconscious, in which the actor uses personal experience to project an 'imagined self' within the shroud of his character.

Fundamental to this manipulation of the self is the willingness of the actor to be extrovert and uninhibited in bearing his feelings to the public. I suspect that a willingness to be extrovert and take risks with performance has a substantial positive effect on the process of

devising. Certainly not all actors feel comfortable with improvisation and I can envisage that it is more agreeable for the actor to build a character and performance based on suggested dialogue and action, rather than engage in on-the-spot invention that has no launch pad or 'endgame'. In order to appreciate the effects of improvisation upon film performance we must first understand how film acting 'conventionally' operates, before inviting questions about the effects of improvisation on performance and whether film acting can exist without improvisation.

Michael Kirby's essay 'Acting and not-acting' (2002: 43) considers acting as a continuum or scale: moving from Nonmatrixed Performing and the Symbolized Matrix, which are located in the 'not acting' area of the scale, through to Received Acting, Simple and Complex Acting, which are considered to be recognised processes of acting. In Kirby's continuum, acting is defined as 'to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate' (ibid: 40). He goes on to say that acting exists in emotional presentation but that 'no emotion needs to be involved' (ibid: 43), and that whilst acting is held up as projecting an emotion, according to Kirby, the quality of the acting matters not [ibid]. Whilst Kirby's scale is interesting, it is not without contradictions, as most performances contain instances of 'acting and not acting' and it is therefore debatable as to what 'mode' of acting we can see at any given point in a performance. In all characterisations we see the 'real' person as well as that which the actor is representing or pretending to be. Essentially, the actor is visible within the character. Kirby says that '[t]he acting/not-acting scale measures pretence, impersonation, feigning, and so forth; it is independent of either the spectator's or the performer's belief.' (ibid: 48). However, the problem with Kirby's 'scale' is that it fails to suggest how we might quantify and measure the amounts of pretence, which in turn would enable us to place examples of acting within a given area on the scale. Neither does Kirby commit to explaining what his

scale reveals about the measurement of acting, which surely must be more than articulating that acting exists in one instance but not the other. For many researchers and tutors, the projection of emotion is a central discourse when discussing the actor's craft with regard to presenting 'realistic' characterisations, an example being *Building A Character* (Stanislavski 2000) and *Acting Emotions* (Konijn 2010). Central to these studies is an exploration of how to use the body and memory to help synthesize and produce emotion within the character.

Elly Konijn's paper 'The Actor's Emotions Reconsidered: A psychological task-based perspective' (2002: 62), offers three categories of acting: the method, the detachment approach and the self-expressive approach. She explores each area in order to analyse the relationship and the fine line between the actor's emotions and those of a character, which she terms 'the actor's dilemma - whether to feel or not to feel' (ibid: 63). Konijn states that the actor's emotions '… must be real, not pretended…their rage and anguish are no imitation. They have to summon their grief and anger from deep within themselves.' [ibid] In summarising her views, Konijn says:

> [T]he actor must create the illusion of spontaneity, genuineness and a "real life" appearance of emotional expressions. According to the involvement acting style this requirement is met naturally when the actor "lives through" the character-emotions on stage. The self-expression style seeks "real" spontaneity and authentic emotional expressions of the actor by emphasizing improvisation and achieving presence during performance. (ibid: 64)

As useful as both perspectives are, in relation to commenting on the extent to which emotion plays a part in defining the role of an actor and encouraging us to think about a possible scale for measuring amounts of pretence in a performance, neither essay comments on how to

create and evaluate the effectiveness of spontaneity in the performance, specifically how we measure the external characteristics of a performance.

Acting as Communication and Behaviour

It might be argued that we employ quasi-acting and improvisation techniques through our daily communication with each other. Of course, whether these spontaneous moments of interaction could be characterised as 'performance', is a phenomenon that will be explored in relation to this practice-based research. Notwithstanding, when improvisation[6] can be viewed as part of the fabric of interpersonal communication, something that occurs on a daily basis, then Spolin's original assertion becomes intriguing and worthy of further examination, as she reminds us '..[T]he techniques of theatre are the techniques of communicating' (Spolin 1999:14) and by default improvisation should really be seen as a symbiotic feature of the human communication skills lexicon.

When thinking about the notion of every day communication as being the potential site of performance, taking into account one's ability to maintain conversation and body language through spontaneous interaction, we might find that Spolin's declaration requires a further context, a caveat to further qualify her sentiments, something to the effect of: *as long as we are unaware of being watched and are comfortable in playing ourselves* then "Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise.' I draw attention to this point because awareness of 'the self' and in relation to others, often creates a stumbling block within our performances;

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[6] Author Judith Weston comments that 'improvisations are not performances' [Weston, 1996: 268]. She suggests that improvisation might be thought of as being a 'What if'. I don't actually agree with Weston's position, as I feel the context of the improvisation is what defines it as a performance.

impinging on the very notion that we can all knowingly and confidently engage in acts of performance. Keith Johnstone comments, '…We all have a universal phobia of being looked at on a stage… Many teachers seem to me to be trying to get their students to conceal fear, which always leaves some traces- a heaviness, an extra tension, a lack of spontaneity.' (1989:30)

The moment we become aware of being the object of another's gaze, is the moment that we start to watch and monitor ourselves. As Johnstone suggests, students attempt 'to conceal fear' (ibid). When discussing the issue of the self-conscious performance with filmmaker Penny Woolcock, specifically in relation to the use of professional and non-actors in *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999), Woolcock stated that:

> It's not easy to give a performance and to be in something and not to be self-conscious. Personally, if there was a camera and you asked me to walk across a room, I would walk across a room in a very funny way, because I would be aware that I was being filmed and I'd find it impossible to do it in an unselfconscious kind of way. So some people can act and some people can't. I think it hasn't got that much to do with whether or not people are trained, or how much experience. [Howe, 2004]

Whilst, for some, self-awareness may give rise to feelings of awkwardness and doubt, for others there might be pleasure in being flattered and 'objectified'. As Michael Kirby reflects:

> At times in real life we meet people who we feel are acting. This does not mean that they are lying, dishonest, living in an unreal world, or necessarily giving a false impression of their character and personality. It means that they seem to be aware of an audience – to be "on stage"- and that they react to this situation by energetically

projecting ideas, emotions, and elements of their personality, underlining and

theatricalising it for the sake of the audience. [2002:43]

Similarly, when it comes to constructing a character on stage, or for the camera, the essence

of natural spontaneity can readily be abandoned and replaced with artifice. As Stanislavski

points out that '...when we step onto the stage we lose our natural endowment and instead of

acting creatively we proceed to perform contortions of pretentious proportions' (2000: 287).

Stanislavski posits 'What drives us to do this? The condition of having to create something in

public view.' (ibid). If we accept that the awareness of 'self' typically leads to a modification

of our behaviour, the masking of some personal attributes and the promoting of others, in

effect, the projection of *another kind of self*, a version of how we would like to be seen and

defined by others, then we must ask: how truthful can the spontaneous and improvised

performance be? Is it a performance comprised of the elements of unfocused posture and

gesture, natural and un-projected voice, random speech patterns that echo trains of random

thought, or is it a far more sophisticated system of finely tuned and interconnected processes,

processes that are connected and seemingly controlled and flowing?

Although a psychoanalytical study of the non-actor is beyond the scope of this

research, I am inclined to accept the principle that our basic ability to modify and improvise

our 'natural' and everyday behavioural scripts[7], can be regarded as being demonstrative of our

capacity to act; whether or not we see ourselves as *being* actors. Both the actor and amateur

do need to be in control, to be able to inhabit a comfort zone whereby the individual can

become a 'playable' character in their own right. Stanislavski observed "There are actors and

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[7] A behaviour script is defined by Anderson, C. (1983) *Imagination and expectation: the Effect of Imagining Behaviour scripts on Personal Intentions*, US: American Psychological Association. Inc

especially actresses who do not feel the need of preparing characterisation or transforming themselves into other characters because they adapt all roles to their own personal appeal." (Stanislavski 2000: 22).   Paradoxically, whilst Stanislavski is critical of such an acting approach, be it propounded by a perceived laziness or lack of an actor's training, it is possible to understand and appreciate the benefits of this approach. The casting of leading women and men is usually determined by the expectation from distributors and audiences that an actor will play a specific character type and play it in a certain way; a way that might have little to do with the scripting of dialogue and everything to do with the actor's inherent body language and collection of 'learnt' and acquired mannerisms and because they have played a similar character in the same way before. It is a commonly held view amongst producers and distributors that, film audiences expect actor's to play similar roles and character types to their last film; a little different perhaps, but not too different! For this very reason, Robert Bresson (*Diary of a Country Priest* 1951, *Pickpocket* 1959, *Mouchette* 1967) reacted to the use of stars and familiar faces in his own work, stating:

> Do not use the same models in two films. (1) One would not believe in them. (2) They would look at themselves in the first film as one looks at oneself in the mirror, would want people to see them as they wish to be seen, would impose a discipline on themselves, would grow disenchanted as they corrected themselves. (1977:44)

In order for the actor to relax into their character, they must psychologically 'deny' that they are being watched. The actor must be indifferent to the attention of others or, conversely, take pleasure in being the object of another's gaze. Even for those of us who have nothing to do with performance or public presentation, to be able to trot out our finely tuned scripts and 'play out' our daily routines we have to be comfortable within ourselves and also at ease

within the contexts in which we deliver our rhetoric to others. That everyone can act and improvise may well be a truism for Spolin, but not everyone can consciously act and improvise to a standard that is 'acceptable' for the movie camera. Some people are simply more adept at externalising and projecting their emotions and this is as true within daily interpersonal communication, as it is when studying the quality of expression offered by the film actor.

In this regard, when analysing performance we need to consider 'how' and 'whether' the quality of expression is appropriate to the needs of the narrative at that particular moment, bearing in mind that the filmmaker equally controls and affects the actor's performance through cinematic intervention. Essentially, the challenge in delivering 'real' or 'enacted' emotional responses lies in our ability to project conviction in what we are doing or feeling at a given moment; presenting clear, unambiguous, body language that signifies what we are feeling or 'what we are about to do'. In *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavski, 1980), the Director, Tortsov, summarises the class' experience in relation to their work on developing imagination:

> Every invention of the actor's imagination must be thoroughly worked out and solidly built on a basis of facts. It must be able to answer all the questions (when, where, why, how) that he asks himself when he is driving his inventive faculties on to make a more and more definitive picture of a make-believe existence. Sometimes he will not need to make all this conscious, intellectual effort, his imagination may work intuitively. (1980:70)

Improvisation: In Search of a Truthful Performance?

"[I]t is not a matter of acting simple or of acting inward but not acting at all"

(Bresson, 1977:49)

A central challenge to both the actors and non-actor's screen performance is vested in the question of 'truth' and 'believability' of the performance. Ultimately, the acting style has to reflect and support the context of the film, specifically in terms of the film's genre and emotional requirements and pacing of the scene, but implicitly the director and spectator are poised to ask whether the character is convinced by the circumstances of in their dramatic situation. Using improvisation to develop the material allows the narrative events and character emotions to be formed in a sequential order and in doing so creates a natural order and flow to developing the material. In addressing the question of truth and inner conviction of the actor, Tortsov claims:

> Truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from belief, nor belief from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both of them it is impossible to live your part, or to create anything. (Stanislavski 1980:129).

If "liv[ing] the part" (ibid) results in a truthful performance, then it is important for the filmmaker to acknowledge that whatever direction an improvisation takes, narrative and characterisation are driven by the actor's lived and experienced emotions. Performance of these lived emotions will be at their strongest when grounded in a personal reality that is comfortable and not alien for the actor. In other words, the actor draws on 'known' and 'felt'

emotions that is informed and supported by an understandable set of ideas; rather than being something that is an artificial implant, to which the actor cannot connect and cannot 'enact'. Undoubtedly, a steadfast conviction in the facts and intentions of the character's situation facilitates the actor's immersion in the part being played. In turn, this conviction enables the actor to project an expression[8] that appropriately and 'truthfully'[9] reflects the emotional intensity of the moment. In my limited experience, when the actor does not believe their character's intention and the narrative situation, the performance appears to falter and read as being false.

The external characteristics of a performance, the 'body language' that is a codified response of the character's state of mind, is the very facet that the trained actor seeks to

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[8] The projection of emotion and expression in the human face is a significant area, which I believe has relevance to our understanding of reading emotion in the improvised performance. Dating back to important explorations pioneered by Charles Darwin, specifically in the publication of *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), this area of research has been further explored by psychologist Paul Ekman, who has written extensively on emotion and developed a range of approaches to measuring emotional expression in the human mask. In 1978, in association with Wallace V. Friesen, Ekman produced a system for decoding expression entitled the Facial Action Coding System (FACS). Out of this research interest, through which he qualified the types of expression and muscles used to create that expression, Ekman produced a broad range of texts on emotion, including *What the Face Reveals: Basic and Applied Studies of Spontaneous Expression Using the Facial Action Coding System (FACS)* (2005) and *Darwin and Facial Expression: A Century of Research in Review* (2006). My interest in this area rests on forming the understanding that what can be decoded, through reading emotion in the face, presumably can be consciously created and encoded at the point of origination, by actor and non-actor alike. Whilst Darwin argued that emotion and its accompanying signifier, the expression, can be viewed as part of our genetic inheritance, surely the actor applies expression in a conscious way that may build upon inheritance but also incorporate learned behavioural patterns. Actors undoubtedly use emotions within their performances and in this regard it can be said that actors consciously and subconsciously 'project' emotional signals in their performances, using both verbal and non-verbal channels of communication. These emotions are controlled and manufactured and therefore might be characterised as 'artificial', in that they are removed from the originary emotional stimuli constructed by the script. In this case, we might argue that the actor's performance can be said to be a projection of remembered emotional or psychophysical response, as well as emotions that are spontaneous, presumably reflexive and unconscious, based on stimuli that happens in the moment of performance. This position raises a number of questions: To what extent are emotions always present within the performance? What is the proportion of controlled emotional expressions to uncontrolled expressions within a performance? How can the spectator differentiate between the 'authentic' spontaneous emotion response and the artificial enacted response?

[9] The concept of 'Truth' in relation to performance is a highly problematic term to both quantify and qualify. 'What we mean by truth in the theatre is the scenic truth which an actor must make use of in his moments of creativeness.' (Stanislavski, 1981:129)

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develop and 'enact' and that a non-actor will hopefully offer up. Whilst the emotional integrity of the character's intention can be intact, the link between what is felt and how this translates to the performance through bodily expression is clearly a challenge. It is the encoding and repeatability of this emotional delivery that particularly differentiates the quality of performance between actor and non-actor. Again, Tortsov reminds his students:

Our art demands that an actor's whole nature be actively involved, that he gives himself up, both mind and body, to his part. He must feel the challenge to action physically as well as intellectually because the imagination, which has no substance or body, can reflexively affect our physical nature and make it act. This faculty is of the greatest importance in our emotion-technique. (1981: 70)

Obviously, the camera has the ability to get close to the performer and reveal every detail of muscular response, reflecting the actor's changing psyche. This ability to 'invade' personal space provides a proximity to the actor that enables the spectator to differentiate a truthful expression from a set of poor or false expressions, irrespective as to whether the filmmaker has used additional cinematic devices, e.g. music and sound, to support the performance.

In carrying my research forward and preparing for production, I was cognisant of the demands and restrictions of both funding and time. From an early stage it was obvious that I would need a range of actors for my planned exercises, as to whether they would be trained or novices was in part addressed by Bresson's notes, in which he remarked that the trained actor (model) is aware of themselves and will seek to 'correct' and impose 'discipline' on their performance (1977:44). This situation seemed counter intuitive to the point of improvisation, which is driven by a quest to get closer to the material and find truth in the dramatic situation and performance. Taken at face value, looking at the process as an outsider, I was persuaded

by the idea that non-actors could offer credible performances that were 'truthful'. As a precursor to embarking on my practical my research, I sought the work of contemporary filmmakers who had used improvisation and also worked with non-actors and spent time investigating the phenomenology of improvisation, as training, performance and aesthetic determinants of practice.

Chapter 2. Improvising on Film: Exploring the Paradox

Improvisation is foremost a phenomenon that exists within a host of cultural and physical contexts. There are many definitions of improvisation and I have particularly favoured Chris Johnston's brief explanation, that it is '[t]he spontaneous invention of words, behaviours, sounds, or movement within a context understood as fictional, aesthetic or representational' (2006: xiii). Improvisation is not only found within a range of art forms and creative disciplines but, we might argue, it is also evident within our everyday communication exchanges. In expanding his terms of reference, Johnston further suggests that: 'Improvisation is a research tool, widely used by artists from all disciplines. It's a staple procedure in creating performance' (ibid: 5) and 'It's arguable that improvisation is in fact inseparable from the creative process, even when the artist is writing or composing' (ibid). On this last point, Johnston makes a highly significant observation that I shall return to later in the analysis of my process.

At the most elementary level, it could be said that a game of charades epitomizes the spirit of an improvised performance, particularly in thinking about the sense of fun and freedom of choice that the game promotes. Chris Johnston is keen to point out that the process is not as random as one might believe, '[c]ontrary to popular belief, improvisation is not some casual exercise. It's not just about 'adlibbing'. While the spirit behind it is often deliberately casual and throwaway, the practice itself does involve a conscious organisation of resources within a context established for that purpose' (2006: 8).

A more comprehensive explanation is offered by Viola Spolin, who defines improvisation accordingly as:

Playing the game; setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you

will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for

you in solving the problem; it is not the scene, it is the way to the scene; a predominate function of the intuitive; playing the game brings opportunity to learn theatre to a cross-section of people; "playing it by ear"; process as opposed to result; not ad-lib or "originality" or "making it up by yourself"; a form, if understood, possible to any age group; setting object in motion between players as in a game; solving of problems together; the ability to allow the acting problem to evolve the scene; a moment in the lives of people without needing a plot or story line for the communication; an art form; transformation; brings forth details and relationships as organic whole; living process. (1999: 361)

From these definitions we can extract some essential ideas about improvisation. Foremost, that it is a tool for composing, playing and research. Secondly, but of equal standing, is the idea that improvisation is born out of an organic and living process and that the performance is created in the moment that it happens, and from the actor's own intuitive resources. Being 'in the moment', whether the impetus for the moment is informed by a script or improvisational muse, will more often than not produce a memorable screen performance. Judith Weston, a supporting director and film acting coach, observes that, '[m]oment-by-moment work is responsible for the tiny flickers of expression that make an actor's face seem alive in between the words. When the actor deliberately tries for such flickers of expression, deliberately tries to hesitate, stutter, wink or grimace, the acting becomes mannered. Mannered acting, by calling attention to the affectations of the actor, takes the audience out of the story' (1996: 58). In this regard, what is being suggested is that the tiny flickers of expression that make an actors come alive cannot be readily manufactured and forced out through acting, rather that they should flow from spontaneity.

In exploring the multifaceted definitions of improvisation, somewhere between its referent in the live arts and relationship to the moving image, it would seem apparent that the

essential context for improvisation is as a point of departure and 'otherness'. Jacques Derrida 'points out that every mental or phenomenal event is a product of difference, is defined by its relation to what it is not rather than by its essence.' (cited in Auslander 2002: 53). In appropriating Derrida's reasoning, we can assert that improvisation is that which 'opposes' institutional practice producing something 'other' than work that has been created through conventional scripting and associated acting processes.

Addressing the issue of filmed improvisation, relative to its standing as a 'live' experience, we can consider that the improvised screen performance is an event that has been captured and fixed in time, which is then quite at odds with the context of other improvised forms played out in theatres, clubs and other live contexts. The paradox being: when performed in a live space, improvisation is viewed as a transient process that is presented in 'real' time, whereas, filmed improvisation represents a performance that has been captured, made permanent and mediated in 'reel'[10] time. Auslander posits that, 'live performance is identified with intimacy and disappearance, media with mass audience, reproduction, and repetition' (2002: 46). In one sense, Auslander's position reflects a widely held view that the liveness of performances context actually legitimizes improvisation through its transient nature.

Seemingly, film can elevate the recorded event, making it more prominent. The recorded event becomes signified as something to watch because it has been recorded and replayed. The filmed event can seem more compelling than reality. In commenting on Robert Blossom's experiments using film within the context of a live performance, 'combining live

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[10] A 35mm projectionists 'reel' holds eleven-minutes of film, as defined within *The Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers,* Volume 26, (1936:93), and the projected material may span the duration of a morning, day, week, month or even years. Unless a sequence is shot and presented as a continuous uninterrupted event, then film time is generally acknowledged to be elliptical, with edits being measured in frames that are fractions of a second. Clearly, live improvisation is not elliptical, although I can imagine a context where the actors manipulate real time by playing a scene in '*slow motion*' as articulated by Spolin (1999:ix).

actors with film in a series of experiments he called Filmstage' [Auslander 2002:41],

Auslander says that, according to Blossom, 'the competition between the actors' live bodies

and the filmed images in these mixed-media performances was intrinsically unfair because the

filmed images were inevitably more compelling.' [ibid] Peggy Phelan offers a counterpoint:

'only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise

participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other

than performance.' (cited in Auslander 2002: 44) She goes on to argue that the

"Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and

linguistically, is its greatest strength." (ibid)

Personally, I have found that arriving at a distinction between 'live' and 'filmed'

improvisation a vexing area. When discussing the uses of improvisation in film production

with other practitioners, particularly those working in the live arts, I have at times

encountered a resistance to my research interests. Indeed, there are some who see filmed

improvisation as being something 'other' than the genuine article. I first encountered this

anxiety whilst attending Eugenio Barba's Improvisation Summer School and ISTA XIV

(2005) conference in Poland, as well as the 'Improvisation Continuums' conference in Wales

(2007)[11]. As far as I could discern, apprehension from those with whom I discussed my

practice, stemmed from the very notion that film 'fixes' a performance and, therefore, is a

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[11] During my research I attended the conferences listed below, which have been useful in situating my own research. At these conferences I have encountered a number of artists and delegates who have been dismissive of the ways in which improvisation can support film and television production, hinting that film acting is a lesser experience than its theatrical equivalent. I have tended to suspect that this intolerance is fuelled by a lack of understanding of the possibilities of the film medium to support spontaneous working methods, and the skills employed by the film actor are certainly no less than those needed within live theatre.

'Improvisation - Memory, Repetition, Discontinuity' [ISTA XIV] comprised Eugenio Barba's summer school and the ISTA workshop and took place in Wroclaw - Krzyżowa, Poland, between 1-15 April 2005. It was organised by The Centre for Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Cultural and Theatrical Research, which was subsequently renamed the Grotowski Institute.

'Improvisation Continuums: theorising practice across disciplines' [12 – 14 April, 2007, hosted by Cardiff School of Creative & Cultural Industries, University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd, South Wales and held at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, North Road, Cardiff.

definitive and permanent re-presentation of the performance. It is unchangeable. Whereas, the presence of an audience promotes the possibility of interaction and an implied 'dialogue' between spectator and performer, which may result in the evolution of the improvised performance. It was put to me that the possibility for change, within the live environment, is the very factor that authenticates the improvisation process. Undaunted by this judgement and implicit critique of film form, my observation is that the 'liveness' of the improvised performance is a transitory event that itself becomes locked in time and fixed in the audience's memory. The 'permanence' of the work, be it a recording, transscription or ephemeral memory of the event, is not that which defines the 'liveness' of the work, as this must surely come at the point of production and performance. Surely it is the context of improvised production, not the resulting artefact or performance, which connotes liveness. The fact that a performance was improvised and simultaneously recorded does not detract from the process and intention of improvising to create a performance. However, as will be explored, vestiges of liveness are present and can be synthesised within the recorded medium, through applying and subverting 'live' and non-fiction filmic conventions.

If we are to accept that idea that the performer modifies their behaviour in response to an implied 'dialogue' with the audience, we must equally accept that this is only made possible when there is feedback between performer and audience, and that the nature of the feedback 'gives permission' to alter the material and/or mode of delivery. Although a live context makes it possible for there to be an interaction between audience and performer, this does not guarantee that such interaction will take place. In a comedy club, where the artiste can take a lead from the audience responses, the notion of improvisation being a state that is affected by the stimulus of the live context certainly holds true. Furthermore, within this context, improvised material has to be 'constructed' and to feed into 'the moment' in a timely manner, and hence the notion of comedic timing. It should be remembered that there are no

guarantees devised materials will play in a satisfactory way. Conversely, they may appear to be forced and/or stilted.

However, it should be remembered that the club environment is only one performance context. In the traditional proscenium or theatre-in-the-round presentation, where interaction between the audience and actor is not expected to mirror the club environment, the validity of improvisation being open to 'evolution' might be considered to be a rather speculative and overstated position. Notwithstanding, actors do place considerable stock in the notion that you can 'feel' the audience. Whilst the actor may claim to be in tune with the audience's presence and mood, I question whether such measurement and evaluation of feelings can be readily achieved, particularly if you cannot see the audience. When an actor is 'in the moment'[12] of the performance, the actor's focus is certainly concentrated on what is being played out within the dramatic context. A laugh, a cry or other audible reaction from the auditorium can be interpreted in a number of ways. As a measure of performance, we might argue that it would be foolish for the actor to rely on auditory responses alone, for it could be rather easy to misinterpret the audible cues. To effectively read an audience's mood, the actor needs visible clues present in the audience's body language. Of course, this is an easier task in the brightly lit open space of classroom or rehearsal room, than when staring out into the darkened chasm of the auditorium. It is an important to note that in film production, as in theatre, it is the director who is the actor's 'critical friend'. It is the director's job to reflect any concerns and evaluate the work in progress on behalf of the actor.

If possible, the suggestion that improvisation in the context of film production is somehow 'inferior' to its practices within a live arena needs to be challenged. From the

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[12] "In the moment" for actors has to do with freedom. It has to do with fearlessness. It has to do with trust. It has to do with the actor not watching himself. It means that whatever preparation an actor does for a role is done ahead of time. Once the camera starts to roll or the curtain goes up, the actor lets go of his preparation and *allows* it to be there. Weston 1996:59

position of the actor, whether performing in front of a paying audience or a critical film crew, the excitement, nervous anticipation and the fear of failure are emotions that inform the improvised moment regardless of the production context. Any notional reassurance, brought about by the knowledge that one can always 'do it again' for the camera, does not readily compensate for the fact that there is a pressure of time and resources and that at some point you simply have to commit a version of the improvised performance to the recording medium. Under these conditions, one can reason that the 'urgency' of improvisation, the feeling that one might possibly falter, is an experience that is present at the point of filming, as much as it is on the stage.

As a process that stands outside the norm and that permits the possibility of play, improvisation proves to be a fascinating lure for those filmmakers looking for an alternative way of creating. Penny Woolcock revealed to me that she would "die of boredom" (Howe, 2004) working in an institutional way, that would involve preplanning shots and storyboards. Yet it is this institutional practice of planning everything ahead, leaving nothing to creative chance, that seemingly determines the context of mainstream production. After all, commercial studios and their producers use the budget's 'bottom line' as the rationale for controlling and constraining the film's development. But given the large budgets[13] that underpin commercial Hollywood productions, this concern is perhaps not wholly unrealistic, given the speculative nature of the commercial enterprise. Even now, Mike Leigh often finds

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[13] As such, there isn't an average cost of a film budget, as depending on whom you ask you will get a different figure. In 2004, Jack Valenti, the outgoing president of Motion Picture Association of America was quoted as saying that 'the average cost of releasing a movie reached $102.8m in 2003 - up 15% on the previous year. That included $63.8m (£35m) to make the film and $39m (£21m) to market it' [BBC News 2004], of course this figure is likely to have shifted due to increased production and marketing costs. Gary Susman's article 'We call it Martian accounting' [Guardian, 31-08-2001] argues that there are too many variables to form an accurate evaluation of a films budget including 'Big-budget studio pic or low-budget indie? Stars or no stars? Contemporary or period piece? Special effects or not?' furthermore, 'no one wants to compromise their bargaining position' by revealing how much their film cost to produce. Journalists Patrick Goldstein and James Rainey, who have a regular column entitled The Big Picture, develop this theme in their article 'Why everyone lies about their movies budget' [LA Times, 2009], arguing that their colleague, John Horn, arrives at an approximation of a film's budget by triangulating the financial claims from different sources. In other words the figures quoted as being a film's budget are headline.

it frustrating and difficult to raise production finance. In 1999, the budget for Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* was noted of being in the order of $10 million (Veltman, 2009). As a point of comparison, Woolcock's *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) had a budget of £200k, which is more typical of a high-end documentary. The main barrier for Leigh is that he effectively begins his development process with a blank sheet of paper. There is no outline or structure and maybe only the suggestion of an idea. Understandably, a leap of faith is required on the part of distributors when it comes to putting up substantial funds to meet his budget requirements and this is significant challenge with his period dramas.

Marketing Otherness: Filmmaking Without A Script

Mike Leigh on Mr Turner: reams of research into painter's life, but no script
Film director has not jettisoned his method of letting actors improvise, he tells Cannes crowd after triumphant screening

(Pluver, 2014)

The 'value' of improvisation as a tool for filmmaking is that it exists in a cultural as well as production context. However, it is a production context that requires the audience to differentiate between work that is improvised and that which is not. As Pluver's headline demonstrates, journalists, filmmakers and their publicists, will use the fact that a film has been improvisation to promote difference. By promoting difference and 'otherness', audiences are invited to look at a particular film or television programme as being a curio, outside the norm, perhaps special and deserving of our attention.

Mike Leigh, director of films including *Mr Turner* (2014), *Another Year* (2010), *Happy-go-lucky* (2008), *Vera Drake* (2004), has been frequently lauded by the press and

supporting media as a leading exponent of improvisation in his filmmaking practice. An interview with Lesley Manville about the process for *Another Year* (2010), further reveals the nature of the devising process and uncertainties for the cast, 'Because Mike Leigh starts work with his actors without a script, urging them to 'research' their characters, and developing his story as they progress, it is hard for them to know in advance how big their roles might be' (Gritten, 2010). Stuart Jeffries interviews Leigh and actor David Thewlis about preparing the character of Johnny for the film *Naked* (1993). The consequences of improvising a rehearsal that started to get 'out of hand' can be seen in this account:

> When the police arrived, I went over and said: 'I'm a director and we're making a film.' The officer asked where the camera was. I said we were improvising, and he wasn't convinced. So we had to take him back to our office and get others to corroborate the story. (Jeffries, 2008)

Internet sources also evidence a range of print and video materials in which Leigh describes his improvisation process. The Hudson Union Society recorded and uploaded a clip to Youtube entitled '*Mike Leigh on Making a "Script-less" Film*' (19-02-2009), which provides a snapshot of Leigh's process. The website *www.bigthink.com* also carries a number of video's entitled '*how-mike-leigh-makes-a-film*'. In his interviews, Leigh is very keen to point out that there is no improvisation on camera, what you see is the result of a honed and rehearsed process (Raphael, 2008:30). For Leigh, improvisation happens in a workshop situation where it is used to develop narrative and character. At the point of filming Leigh distils the many months of improvisation into a 'shooting script', as he says:

> It's a very short thing. Merely a structure. No dialogue. No detailed descriptions. From my point of view, the whole operation is designed to make it possible for me to be

genuinely spontaneous and creative on the shoot – literally to make it all up with the creative team.

The material, though starting life as being improvised, is worked and reworked through improvisation until Leigh and the actor's really know the essence of the scene.

> It's only when we get on location that for the first time we do real rehearsing – repeating it till its right. This is really the writing stage. I never go away and write dialogue and come back with it on paper. In fact the actors never see it on paper. I'll set up an improvisation, and when it's all over I'll analyse and discuss it. Then we'll do another and I'll stop that at some point and start to fix what happens and who says what. (ibid)

It is a fact that Leigh uses a script supervisor on set. Heather Storr has worked with Leigh on eleven projects and she tells me that 'her job is to take notes through the various phases of rehearsal and arrive a written script of the material during the shoot, which broadly contains the directors notes and changes etc…it's a kind of bible'. Within the final screen performance we are seeing the results of a complex development process; characters that have, at the point of filming, a set of learnt responses and interactions. There is very little, if any, improvisation on camera, to the extent that dialogue is not invented at the moment of performance. (ibid).

For Leigh, improvisation has become his own 'institutional' mode of production, a way of keeping the content creation process fresh and that facilitate the exploration of character in a joined up way. Likewise, Penny Woolcock sees improvisation as a respite to the conventions of 'institutional' filmmaking experience:

What I can never imagine myself doing, is working out everything, including shots
and storyboards and all of that. Then the shoot, as a process, is simply nailing down
these things that you've planned. I'd die of boredom. I couldn't do it. I couldn't get
out of bed to do that. So that although the level of improvisation, whether it's just the
use of handheld cameras and following the actors and not having marks, or whether
it's having the dialogue pinned down, or whether everything is improvised. It just
varies you know. (Howe, 2004)

It can be argued that a film or television drama is only recognised as being a product of
improvisation once the audience are offered a 'context' revealing that the filmmaking process
has been influenced by this particular production approach. Otherwise the audience must
assume that the dramatic presentation has been scripted and that a distinct aesthetic has been
applied. Arguably, an explanation of how the performance has been constructed and presented
is essential for the audience's 'appreciation' and enjoyment of the improvisation process,
which is certainly the case for shows such as *Whose Line is it Anyway* [Channel 4]. Once the
audience know that a performance is improvised, a specific relationship with the material and
mode of production is formed. Most notably the audience will take pleasure in discovering
how the actors will work with the impetus for the narrative and handle the dramatic obstacles
that they meet. Within shows such as *Whose Line is it Anyway*, improvisation is invariably
played for its comedic value, not its earnest and/or dramatic quality. This show can be
described as an articulation of the *Theatresports* format (www.theatresports.com), developed
by Keith Johnstone, which tends to revolve around short form, sketches and games[14] that are
moderated by a compare. Over the last decade, a number of television series have been

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[14] Resource Link: http://www.improvencyclopedia.org/ is a website that provides a list of games, many of which
are based around Theatresports games. *The Living Playbook* [2001] provides a list of games and approaches to
improvisation and it exists as an online presence: http://www.unexpectedproductions.org/living_playbook.htm.

developed that utilize improvisation in the performances. Offering a context that is different from the comedy stand-up, shows such as Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-2011), Christopher Guest's *Family Tree* (HBO, 2013), Andy Hamilton & Guy Jenkins' *Outnumbered* (BBC 2007-2014) and Dominic Savage's, *True Love* (BBC, 2012) have defined characters and contexts, wherein the content of the scenes is largely, though not exclusively, produced through improvisation. In describing the process of working on *Outnumbered,* Daniel Roche, who plays the part of Ben reveals:

> They tell us the scenes about five minutes beforehand…..With improvised scenes, you have a bit where the script ends, but the scene doesn't, so they give us a few ideas and tell us if it's supposed to be a conversation, an argument or a discussion. The fun part is you never know what people are going to come out with. (Parker, 2012)

Similarly, Tyger Drew Honey, who plays the character Jake, comments:

> The way the improvisation works with Jake is that one of the directors would come up to me and give me a script a few minutes before the scene, so I have time to familiarise with the script but not to memorise it. Maybe halfway through filming the scene they'll suggest we have a chunk of improvisation, which consists of the camera running, while the actors basically say whatever they want - usually it's hilarious.
>
> (Drew Honey, 2010)

Of course, by stating that work is produced from an improvisation process is a practical means of separating and making a distinction from material that is not improvised. In effect, the production context, whether this is offered as notes in a supporting programme or intertextual information revealed through a range of journalistic channels, emphasizes the perceived benefits of the improvisation process. For example, Christopher Guest, actor and filmmaker known for his work on *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), *Waiting for Guffman* (1996),

expounds on the process of improvisation on his recent series *Family Tree* (2013). He says 'I've done scripted stuff before, but my choice would always be to work in this way because it elicits what I need. This is the most fun way to work, and one of my chief aims – believe it or not – is to have fun. Once you get the people you want, it's like playing music.' (Rampton, 2013). When evaluating the actor's relationship to the long-form improvisation process in his series, he reveals '[w]hen the actors are given a strict back history and they know where their character went to school, what music they like and who their friends are, it allows a spontaneity that doesn't come with other forms of comedy.' (ibid).

The 'Liveness' of Filmed Improvisation

To further consider the perception of improvisation as a 'live' response, it is worth pausing to consider the way in which the performance is codified and re-presented via the contexts that surround the broadcasting or distribution of the material. In the theatre, the improvised performance is characterised by the actuality of its 'liveness' as well as its visceral and instinctual qualities; the ability of the actor to adapt and respond to intervention brought about through audience feedback. Paradoxically, there is a commonly held view that improvisation within television also carries connotations of this liveness, particularly if the programme itself references an off-camera and 'live[15]' audience, as in the case of *Whose Line is it Anyway*. It has been claimed by a number of writers that the medium itself signifies a programme's liveness. Jane Feuer (1983) argues that the definition of television as an ontologically live medium remains part of our fundamental conception of the medium – even though television ceased long ago to be live in an ontological sense, it remains so in an ideological sense' (cited

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[15] The question of whether the audience is live, or not, clearly depends on the show. *Whose Line is it Anyway* is filmed in a studio setting before an audience, whereas some television shows, such as *Last of the Summer Wine,* have to be screened before an audience to create a live laughter track, because the scenes were shot on location. Whether the laughter tracks are 'authentic' or have been manipulated and boosted by including pre-recorded or 'canned' laughter is also a consideration in evaluating the liveness of material.

in Auslander 2008:12). Likewise, 'Rick Altman (1986: 45) has made a similar observation: "whether the events transmitted by television are live or not, the television experience itself is…sensed as live by the home viewing audience." [Ibid]. As if to counter this, Bretz offers the view that television "…is a medium of the camera and as such has departed almost as far from the live theatre as has the medium of film" (ibid: 21). In commenting on Bretz's view of television, Auslander remarks that 'to replicate theatrical discourse on television means to present a static television image' (ibid). However, whilst the vantage point of a televised event may be constructed from a succession of fixed/static or single cameras, we must be careful about conceptualising the camera, whether employed in television or film, as being 'static'. Clearly, cameras do move, through tracking devices, jibs, and simple pans and tilts of the tripod head. But we must also remember that the act of editing, cutting from one camera position to another, for example Long Shot to Close Up, does present a physical change in the viewer's perspective. The edit produces a perspective shift and effectively gives the sense of motion and objectivity in being omnipresent. In doing so it alters our point of view and sense of how the narrative space is constructed. Thus television can never really be static, anymore than the audience point of view in theatre is 'static', for we are able to avert and shift our gaze, as well as focus in and concentrate on specific details.

Television has been historically seen as a 'live' medium and when talking about 'the immediacy of television drama', Lenox Lohr (president of NBC) says "the instantaneous nature of the broadcast gives drama a certain superiority over filmed drama. The spectator knows that he is seeing something actually taking place at the moment" (cited in Auslander 2002:17). To further qualify this, at a time when sitcoms used to be frequently filmed before 'live' audiences, and were advertised or telegraphed accordingly, the programme makers would ensure that studio audiences were 'miked up', so that viewing public could hear the audience interactions during the broadcasting of the show. Invariably, as in the case of

comedy shows, this ultimately led to the recording of laughter. Producers and broadcasters believed that the audible 'presence' gave credence to the 'liveness' of the recorded event, with the implication that the studio's reactions were a 'real' response to the on-screen comedy. In her essay *Laughing Together? TV Comedy Audiences and the Laugh Track*, Bore writes 'The two interlinked functions of the laugh track to present broadcast comedy as a live social experience and to emphasize its "comic impetus"(Mills *The Sitcom* 5) – highlight broadcast comedy's historical roots in live entertainment' (Bore, 2011:24).

Of course, we now know that laugh tracks were added to boost and supplement responses of the studio audience and, furthermore, that these 'laugh tracks' will have been inserted in post-production when no audience was present at the recording. Bore suggests that 'the laugh track continues to *suggest* a live performance' suggesting that it has continued to remain important due to 'the modern notion of authenticity associated with the live event as a unique and genuine experience' (ibid: 25) As Auslander himself posits 'the "live" can be defined only as 'that which can be recorded.' (2008: 56).

One of the dominant ideas emerging from the definition of improvisation is its purported ability to promote a sense of liveness in film, and how this aesthetic condition might be viewed as a further cinematic coding of the 'real'. Baudrillard has written that "the very definition of the real is *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction'* (cited in Auslander 2008:56). The 'reproduction' of a reality, the success of which may be attributed, in part to the verisimilitude of the production design, can also be considered from the position of developing characters and dramatic contexts and also how the improvisation is filmed. Fly-on-the-wall films, and notably mock-documentaries (Roscoe & Hight, 2001) are an example of a practice that offers a host of aesthetic signifiers connoting 'the real' throughout their production, such as handheld photography, varied exposure, trombone zooming in and out, in shot reframing and focusing, all of which have come to represent what

audiences believe is a 'live' and 'truthful' representation of the found world. Of course many docudramas or mock-documentaries have decisively played with such visual signifiers in order to consciously promote the notion of a filmed 'reality'.

The production of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) attracted such attention through the press and the fan websites, with particular regards to the 'mock-documentary aesthetic' (Roscoe & Hight, 2001: 187). The use of improvisation and an unusual 'remote control' directing technique has been noted by Dan Karcher, Haxan Films' archivist, who says that, '[f]or the film to work, the acting had to be completely realistic, just like a real documentary. To achieve that, we had to develop an entirely new way of directing. We called it Remote Control Directing' (Karcher, 2004). The technique involved leaving actors' instructions inside tubes along with their provisions. This was the only contact the actors had with the crew during filming.   In the case of *The Blair Witch Project,* articles concerning the film's production techniques have emerged, in the years following the film's release, and contribute to the mythologizing around the films' process. This notion of a 'remote' and unscripted process identifies the work as being an exception to the mainstream. Although, it should be noted that the directors worked to a 'shooting script'.

Other filmmakers such as John Cassavetes in *Shadows* (1959), *Faces* (1968) and *Woman Under the Influence* (1974), have also used a verite, documentary style within their films, not to parody the material or the form, but to infuse the work with a gritty edginess, unease and hightened reality.

When viewed as a tool for developing content in both rehearsal and during filming, improvisation offers a release from the constraint of the printed word, a way of freeing up and finding fresh expressions of character and emotion. In continuing the idea of invigorating character and performance, it could be claimed that improvisation offers a solution to the deterioration of performance, which is a significant consideration in a production environment

that requires repeated takes. As Patrice Pavis has suggested, 'theatre repeated too often deteriorates' (cited in Auslander 2008: 55). However, it must be remembered that in freeing the actor from a physical script, the improvising actor necessarily adopts an alternative constraint, in the form of their 'virtual script'. Drawing upon notional character details that have been informed by preparatory work, the actor is able to improvise the content of a scene, by playing with the emotion, action and the dialogue. This improvised content may be based on the actor's own experiences but, because of the context offered by the film, it becomes reformatted and redeployed in a specific performance context. Whilst being personal and biographical to the actor, the raw emotion and contents have become repurposed and are therefore hidden from their original sources.

Improvisation is not only the actuality of a performance constructed in the moment, it is also a way of 'being', an awareness of the possibilities of self as an independent body and mind operating in a given moment; a character that is working to its own self-imposed and predefined agenda, rather than being limited to the call of an external goal-driven narrative.

As a product of the live performance, improvisation draws from the creative consciousness in the moment of the actor's presentation. 'In his reading of Freud, Derrida asserts that the making conscious of unconscious materials is a process of creation, not retrieval: there is then no unconscious truth to be rediscovered by virtue of having been written elsewhere' [cited in Auslander 2002: 55]. This sense of creating in the moment, rather than retrieving from the unconscious, is an important consideration in relation to creating improvised character. We might even be happy to contest Derrida's interpretation of Freud, because the act of creating character could be defined as a process of consciously 'consuming' and 'writing' to memory a character's imagined biographic details, in order that they can be retrieved during performance. For example, it is possible to envisage that in the character development process for a Mike Leigh film, a process that sometimes lasts for six

months, materials that have been created within improvisations may be both conscious and partially unconscious elements. These materials arguably then become the 'unconscious truth[s]' of a character's personality, to be played out. However, we must be careful not to fetishize the role and status of the unconscious in relation to performance, because '[the] unconscious is not a source or originary truth – like language, it is subject to the vagaries of mediation.' [Auslander 2002: 55] Furthermore, in commenting on the transference of experience to memory Derrida, as cited in Auslander, says '[t]he process of recording unconscious materials itself creates those materials which exist only as traces in the unconscious, not as fully formed data. Thus, "Everything begins with reproduction" (211) and "we are written only as we write" (226)' (ibid). Undeniably, performance is made up of experience that is stored in the memory but, as Stanislavski points out, 'memory distorts' (cited in Auslander 2002:55) and 'the information we retrieve is not the same as the data we store, adding that distorted memories are of greater use to the actor than accurate ones because they are purified, universalized, and therefore, aesthetic in nature.' (ibid.)

It could be argued that Leigh's improvisation process evidences the fact that the actor can 'retrieve' the developed and constructed memories of character, which have been discovered and enhanced during work-shopped improvisations; although this has to be countered by the observation that at the point of filming, Leigh's actors are working to more tightly controlled interpretations of character that have been rehearsed. By contrast, in relation to on-the-spot improvisations, such as Theatresports[16] improvisation games, there is no time to 'absorb' character materials into the unconscious, thereby letting an internal and 'mysterious' alchemy influence creativity. Rather, as my reference to Derrida implies, improvisation in the Theatresports process is a creative experiment in the moment. In this

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[16] 'The International Theatresports™ Institute (ITI) is the official worldwide licensor of improvisation formats created by Keith Johnstone.' http://www.theatresports.org/en/index.php

sense we could argue that there is no unconscious or ingrained presence of character, only character that is born in the moment.

Chapter 3: Towards a Methodology for Improvisation Practice.

Deciding on a creative strategy towards my own filmmaking practice proved a difficult first step, particularly as I had no previous first-hand experience of improvisation in a practical filmmaking context. At this juncture, my working knowledge of improvisation had been largely influenced by key texts such as *The Improvised Play: The Work of Mike Leigh* (Clements 1983), *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (Johnstone 1989) and *Improvisation for the Theatre* (Spolin, 2000), and analysing a range of fiction films that purported to use improvisation within their construction, including: *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) and *Vera Drake* (2004). I chose these texts because I believed that they offered some valuable insights into developing an improvisation practice, such as Mike Leigh's casting and workshop methods and Johnstone's observations about status[17], as demonstrated in the master-servant improvisation games[18], and explorations into accepting and blocking within an improvisation. By comparison, the films proved more problematic to unpack, particularly as exemplars of an films employing improvisation practices. On the one hand, Leigh's work presented itself as being the product of a considered and 'planned' process, employing institutional methods of production, encompassing all techniques that work to create an 'invisible' cinema that does not draw attention to film form. For reasons that will be discussed later, Leigh's films appear to be quite removed from the ephemeral and 'live' aesthetic that vérité styles might evidence. In fact, the critic may reasonably pause to question what remains of Leigh's improvisation process, following the complex filtering

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[17] Johnstone points out that 'Status is a confusing term unless it's understood as something one does. You may be low in social status, but play high, and vice versa.' (1989:36)

[18] In contextualising the Master-Servant improvisations, Johnstone says that 'The relationship is not necessarily one in which the servant plays low and the master plays high. Literature is full of scenes in which the servant refuses to obey the master, or even beats him and chases him out of the house. The whole point of the master-servant scene is that both partners should keep see-sawing.' (Johnstone 1989: 63).

process that his institutional production methods employ. This is certainly an area that I was forced to question with regard to my own working practices, particularly after completing *Birdman* in 2008. By contrast, when looking to the examples of Myrick & Sanchez and Woolcock, I felt that these films clearly exhibited the hallmarks of a live process, which was epitomized by distinct vérité styles of practice. Both *The Blair Witch Project* and *Tina goes Shopping* utilize modes of representation that are analogous to the documentary form, resulting in filmed material that is hand-held, often poorly lit or filmed with available lighting, employing jump cuts and lacking in non-diegetic music. As was the case with *The Blair Witch Project*, the documentary aesthetic was part of the film's illusion and attempt to 'claim the real', and present a living text through its stylised mock-documentary form [19]. Undoubtedly, film form problematizes reading and deciphering the application of improvisation within a completed film text, as the mediation process promotes questions of authenticity and 'truth' with regard to what is being presented. However, if one ignores the aesthetic differences of form, the handheld the locked off camera and beautiful lighting, then it may be possible to differentiate between films that have been scripted and those that are spontaneous, as represented by *The Blair Witch Project* and *Tina Goes Shopping*. The basis of this differentiation is located in the actors' gestures and pacing, as well as other verbal and non-verbal signifiers. In Chapter 4, Practice Based Research, I specifically address the matter of reading an improvised performance by looking at the codified facets of improvised performance in relation to practices in my own films.

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[19] 'Mock-documentary' is a term examined by Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight in *Faking it: Mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality* (2001). 'Mock-documentaries are fictional texts which in some form 'look' like documentaries. These texts tend to appropriate certain documentary modes, as well as the full range of documentary codes and conventions. They frequently appropriate the observational mode, (especially 'rockumentaries', themselves a sub-category of the observational form), and interactive and expositional modes of documentary' (Roscoe, R. and Hight, C. 2001: 49).

Practice as research has afforded me the opportunity to 'play' with the improvisation process and develop a personal working methodology. Apart from the commentaries surrounding Leigh's working practices, the techniques of working with improvisation in film production have been largely un-documented. It was not until I had undertaken my first practical steps that I began to realise the complexity of improvisation in relation to cinema. The process of 'mediating' an improvised performance through the language of cinema raises questions about what the director and audience are expecting to see within an improvised film performance and whether or not the filmmaking process facilitates improvisation practices. Early in my research, I began looking for a guide or 'model' of improvisation practice that might be common to a number of filmmakers using improvisation.

Although commentaries regarding the working methods of Leigh, Myrick and Sánchez have been available through interviews and secondary sources, much is missing from these filmmakers' accounts by way of a detailed evaluation of the strengths or weaknesses in their approaches. In thinking about the workshop processes employed by Mike Leigh, it is worth noting that much of the improvisational work that informs character is jettisoned through the actuality of Leigh distilling the ideas into a structure and 'shooting script'. The timespan between Leigh setting up the exploratory improvisations and distilling these ideas into a shooting script could be many months. In commenting on this process Leigh remarks:

'Having worked at the characters for ages, the actors can go into character and do a wonderful improvisation that might go on for one or two hours non-stop. That doesn't give you a scene. That merely suggests a scene. My job is to distil that into something that happens in a few minutes and says just as much. And indeed says more, because obviously my job is also to inject things into it and edit things out, and to open up stuff that's dormant.' (Actor Hub, 2014)

Whilst this gestation period allows for the synthesis of ideas, the end result is, nevertheless, a script. 'Leigh writes an outline of scenes which then can become a general outline for the final film or play. The actors improvise specifically around these scenes, while an assistant takes notes. The best lines and moments are then distilled and scripted, and shooting can at last begin.' (ibid)

It is not a map for improvisation on camera. Clearly, Leigh's process results in the mediation and reinterpretation of improvised ideas that were previously explored within a workshop environment, and this 'literary' transformation, into a shooting script (Raphael, 2008), must inevitably result in a synthesised version of the original improvisation. Whilst the actors of a Mike Leigh film may be able to recall the workshop experiences, leading to the discovery of character and a particular set of narrative circumstances, the thoughts and feelings created in the improvisation workshops have become 'remembered' experiences that are re-articulated through rehearsal. Therefore, what is filmed becomes a number of stages removed from the original improvised moment, as Leigh clarifies, "What I shoot is quite structured. Though the dialogue may at times be improvised, the intentions are all planned and very precise." [20](ibid)

Sally Hawkins describing her experiences on *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008) says, '.. every day presented a different challenge. It felt at times like I just had to keep running, to keep going from scene to scene with lines learnt only days – and, sometimes, minutes – before the camera started rolling.' (Actor Hub, 2014)

In looking at Leigh's relationship to the improvisation process, in spite of the actors being allowed to 'discover' and improvise their character within the workshop environment,

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[20] This is an interesting point because in the discussions and contentions surrounding notions of authorship in relation to Leigh's films, Leigh can justly claim that the film's characters have been mediated through his 'scripting' (for which he always credits himself) and the filmmaking process. This is because the characters are specifically 'controlled' versions of material that was offered through the improvisation process.

Leigh is quite clear that his process does not permit exploratory work to be extended to the set. What is filmed is the product of a thorough investigation.

By contrast, the aim in writing an outline/shooting script for *Blood Offering* was not to distil performance choices, but to provide a 'springboard' for further performance activity; a starting point from which the actors could develop a scene. As I discovered in my own practice, to develop authenticity in a performance, the director needs to create a dramatic context whereby the character can get behind the logic of their own beliefs, as Stanislavski articulated:

> In a play the whole stream of individual, minor objectives, all the imaginative thoughts, feelings and actions of an actor, should converge to carry out the super-objective of the plot. The common bond must be so strong that even the most insignificant detail, if it is not related to the super-objective, will stand out as superfluous or wrong. (1981: 271).

Psychologically, this momentum exists within a theatre performance and leads towards a rising dramatic curve, in what Stanislavski would define as the 'through-action' or 'through-line of action'[21] (Benedetti, 2000:83). The problem with narrative film production is that the momentum and interaction between character and their dramatic situation is repeatedly broken through the intervention of filmmaking practices.

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[21] Jean Benedetti (2000) produced a table of comparative terminology that identifies the differences between Stanislavski's description of an actor's analytical task and how this has been labelled through translation by Elizabeth Hapgood. Within this table both terms describing the 'Through-action' invite the actor to 'Check whether the sequence of needs and actions is logical and coherent and relates to the subject of the play'.

Improvising with the Non-Actor

The influence of directors such as Vittorio De Sica, Robert Bresson, and Penny Woolcock, all of whom employed non-actors at various times in their filmmaking activities, undoubtedly provoked my curiosity and encouraged me to explore this territory in greater depth. De Sica's following comments on the use of the non-actor suggests a particular directorial concern that has drawn a number of practitioners, including myself, towards this creative endeavour:

> Time and time again, particularly as far as the children in my films are concerned, I am asked how I get people who are quite new to the camera to act. My answer is that their ignorance is an advantage, not a handicap. The man in the street, particularly if he is directed by someone who is himself an actor, is raw material that can be modelled at will... It is difficult – perhaps impossible-for a fully trained actor to forget his profession (Cardullo, 2002:169)

Contained in this simple thought, De Sica clearly suggests that the perceived benefit of the amateur's lack of training, which he positions as that of 'ignorance', results in a performance that is different. Implicitly, he suggests that the trained actor would be aware of himself and the requirement to develop a character through performance. Whilst the amateur is not precluded from engaging in such attempts at characterisation, De Sica supposes that the non-actor will inherently be *unaware* of the requirements of performance. Though he does not expand on this point, we might reason that De Sica is articulating and calling for the antithesis of a trained actor, that is someone who is spontaneous and natural. This is an interesting point, because implicit to this reasoning is the idea that a scripted performance and character may outwardly exhibit its development and appear artificial and not 'true to life'. Whilst this may be the case, regardless as to whether the actor has been trained or not, it is important to

remember that the screen performance is the result of creative choices that are made in the moment and these can be 'intuitive' as well as pre-planned. [22]

For all of this, De Sica articulates the necessity to control and 'direct' the actor, highlighted in the notion that the actor is "raw material" (ibid) and he might "[model] at will" (ibid) the amateur's performance. The very idea that the non-actor may willingly subjugate himself to the director, without meeting creative resistance, is a theme that is explored through my practical research. Working without a written script, whereby the script is typically viewed as the document that both *authors* and *authorises* the narrative and character, creates a different type of collaborative relationship between actor and filmmaker. Working without a script, or in situations where the director has given permission for the actor to go 'off-script', empowers the actor and makes it possible for a vast range of acting choices to be explored through improvisation. In so doing, the actor and director need to be able to stand back from the process and agree to the actor's creative responses at any given point. The actor has the right to take ownership and be the author of their improvised performance, as much as the filmmaker has the right to nudge the material in a specific direction. As one might expect, this is, potentially, a key difficulty when working in this manner and is bound to frustrate many collaborations. In fact, my observation from this process is that the relationship is only really successful when built on a trust that has been negotiated between filmmaker and actor.

The challenge for the non-actor is to create a performance that flows and that is authentic to circumstances of the situation. This may result in a highly charged and emotive scene or something that is dramatically very low-key, almost to the point of being nondescript. Working with non-actors presents the filmmaker with a particular challenge in that, from the

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[22] It is worth noting that the trained actor as well as the non-actor is capable of making 'poor' creative choices, as well as successful choices, within their performance. It is reasonable to assume that one of benefits of actor training is to expose the actor to and analyse the range of possible choices in devising character, such as working with posture, gesture and language, and by doing so, this will sensitise the actor to the pitfalls that may possibly lead to contrived, obvious and 'uninformed' performance choices.

outset, one has to accept that the performances offered up will often be variable and inconsistent, precisely because the actor is not monitoring themselves and moderating their performance. One strategy that occurred to me was to find a way of reducing the acting. As mentioned previously, French filmmaker Robert Bresson (*Pickpocket* 1956, *Mouchette* 1967, *L'argent* 1983) used non-actors in most of his films. Like De Sica, Bresson was intent on a taking control over the actor's performance and asserts, 'Radically suppress *intentions* in your models' (1977:8)[23]. Described as a Modernist filmmaker (Baron & Carnicke 2011:13-14) his 'minimalist' technique with actors and other elements of his screen craft drew attention to the film's form and content. Bresson sought minimal performances from his actors, characterised as neutral, expressionless and containing minimal physical gesture (ibid), which would be achieved by running the actor's lines and actions over and over again; thereby stripping out the tendency to embellish the material in a dramatic and enlivened way. Instead, he wanted the drama to emanate from the juxtaposition of elements (ibid). Bresson defined this performance style as automatism 'Nine-tenths of our movements obey habit and automatism. It is anti-nature to subordinate them to will and to thought' (1977:11). Setting out his ideas in *Notes on Cinematography* (1977) Bresson saw the craft of screen acting as something that should be minimal and reduced to the point of being almost invisible "it is not a matter of acting simple or of acting inward but not acting at all" (ibid: 49)

In relation to creating believable characters through improvisation I feel there is merit to Bresson's approach, as I would argue that the qualities of a naturalistic performance can be defined as something that is 'other' than the anticipated, stylised and emotional responses of tightly scripted drama. In my own work I wanted the actor's to 'be' instead of representing a thought out point of view. As Bresson said of his own work with actors:

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[23] Bresson used the term 'model' to describe his film actors. His approach to working with actors/models is qualified in the first page of *Notes on Cinematography* (1977:1): No actors. (No directing of actors). No parts. (No learning of parts). No staging. But the use of working models, taken from life. BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors).

Models who have become automatic (everything weighed, measured, timed, repeated ten, twenty times) and are then dropped in the middle of the events of your film – their relations with the objects and persons around them will be *right*, because they will not be *thought*. (1977:12)

The idea that a more natural and less forced film acting style might be the result of suppressing the non-actors 'intention' and 'will' does not seem particularly logical, especially when discussing the processes of improvisation. If we are to accept the idea that improvisation is a skill that 'everyone' is capable of harnessing, then we must evaluate the foundations on which an improvised performance is built. These foundations may not necessarily be developed through logic and reasoned exploration, but through experiential development and letting actors feel their way through the material. In Paul Sill's introduction to Spolin's work (1999:ix) he writes "It is on intuition, by the way, that Viola is an authority; intuition being the direct knowledge of something without the conscious use of reasoning. It is a way of knowing other than intellectual knowing." Whilst the spectator cannot be party to the intuitive and intellectual impulses that the actor chooses, the visible evidence and roots of all performance can be readily observed in the communication skills that an actor has naturally acquired in the years of growing up. These communication skills are a rich and varied palette of verbal and non-verbal behaviours that the actor can draw from, without the need to subvert or 'put on' a performance comprising of less refined and 'artificial' mannerisms.

Improvisation: Intuitive Response or Intellectual Approach

'We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything. This is as true for the infant moving from kicking to crawling to walking as it is for the scientist with equations' (Spolin, 1999:3).

Undoubtedly, when taken together with her statement, '[ev]eryone can act. Everyone can improvise', Spolin's comments can be regarded as provocative; inviting the reader to rethink the relationship between acting and improvisation, particularly how we learn and acquire craft and motor skills, as well as appraising the contexts in which acting takes place. However, Spolin's sentiments are at odds with the primary project of her *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1999), which is to offer a text that 'teaches' a range of improvisation techniques that may be used for developing character, emotion, structure and so forth. I am drawing attention to Spolin's position precisely because she situates improvisation and the performance processes within a primal context, framing the acting process as being the product of our 'intuition'. This suggests that acting is based on innate responses rather than those that are intellectualised and planned, bringing us firmly into the research territory of Charles Darwin and Paul Ekman (see footnote 8). Whilst I would not deny that actor training is an important platform for learning to flex physical and emotional 'muscles' and memory, clearly 'instinct' and un-schooled techniques, as well as those 'behavioural scripts' that we learn as children, are more than adequate in allowing the untrained actor to deliver a film performance. One way of evaluating Spolin's position is to view her stance from an educationalist's perspective, wherein her pedagogy is concerned with the way in which actors develop their skills and how this informs their practice. She articulates that because acting draws from our innate and primal instincts, the actor's learning and development strategies require a way of coaxing that is experiential and fundamentally enjoyable. In drawing together some conclusions on acting, Stanislavski said that we are born 'with an innate capacity for creativeness' (2000: 287).

Although difficult to quantify, many would accept that intuition plays an important role in the creative process, especially when improvising character and narrative events/actions. For Bresson, the innate and intuitive represented an automatism that he wanted to capture on film. Although we might regard the effects of his automatism as being highly stylised, Bresson was clearly looking to apply constraints and limit the emotional canvas of his actors on film.

This brings us to the inevitable question of what is an intuitive moment? Is it the point in an improvisation where the actor's response is a 'conditioned reflex' or is it 'innate' and beyond the actor's control? That which appears to be an intuitive performance, seemingly born from transient 'whim', may in fact be a constructed reflex stimulated by ideas inspired through actor training and other social and cultural influences. But the intuitive performance of the non-actor is arguably more likely to be viewed as innate, because there has been no actor training.

In evaluating my practice I will be addressing the effects of intuitive performance upon the screen character. In effect, I will be looking at those elements of a performance that are typically regarded as being visceral and ephemeral, but which in fact have an identifiable and 'living' quality that is discernable within the screen performance. This may seem to be a paradox when considering the notion of acting in film, given that the filmed performance is regarded as being fixed and quite removed from the notion of a live event: the live event being associated with the creation and performance of work that is technologically unmediated and open to the possibility of change.

In the course of developing practice-based research, I have found myself repeatedly wrestling with Spolin's emphatic belief that irrespective of our ability, we all have the capacity to inter-act and perform in a spontaneous and intuitive way. Like a pebble in the shoe, Spolin's observations have provided a site of contestation against which I have been

able to evaluate my own journey through improvisation. Whilst I have been happy to use the notion of experiential learning as the basis for my own improvisation practice and in doing so believe that I have witnessed actors, and non-actors, using their intuition to create a range of performances. I have been less inclined to align and commit myself to Spolin's view that the improviser and filmmaker cannot be 'taught' anything, that improvisation and acting are exclusively intuitive. On the contrary, as my own experience evidences, as the practitioner develops an understanding of how to work with improvisation, how it can be applied and what effects it promotes, then clearly both the actor and filmmaker have engaged in a 'learning' process in which the techniques and values of improvisation have been explored, evaluated and assimilated. As I will demonstrate, film acting doesn't just happen; a number of conditions have to be in place to support the performance.

Improvisation and the Craft of Playing

In momentarily returning to *Improvisation for the Theatre*, it is worth noting that Spolin comments on how drama effectively flourishes within the context of an improvisation game (2000:5), noting particularly how the improviser's skills can be successfully and intuitively developed through the notion of 'play'. This notion of play and experimentation is one of the core reasons for using improvisation. Spolin postulates that we exhibit intuition in performance and develop intuitive knowledge through playful experiences. Furthermore, she asserts that within the appropriate creative environment we become active learners: 'If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he or she chooses; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach everything it has to teach.' (Spolin, 2000: 3) In one sense, Spolin appears to advocate that intuition is not simply a facet of performance, but also a determinant of acting practice. In taking this stance, she suggests that the performer's ability

is largely informed by our invisible and innate sensibilities. Although I am conflating the notions of intuition[24] and innateness, placing them semantically into the same operative category, Spolin herself characterizes the intuitive as being something natural and inborn, a condition that is beyond logical thought and reason. These features are themselves defining properties of the innate sensibility. Although some might take issue with Spolin's concept of intuition as being a determinant for performance, it is this concept that has, to a large extent, informed the direction of my practice with the non-actor. At a fundamental level, my research addresses the non-actor's innateness, their capacity to read, interact and deploy emotional expressions.

Spolin is not alone in championing the value of experiential learning and characterising 'improv' as a tool for emotional and psychological release. Writing sixteen years after the publication of Spolin's text, Keith Johnstone produced an equally influential work entitled *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979)[25], in which he observed that providing an effective learning environment, in much the same way as Spolin advocated, released actors from preconceived ideas about themselves and encouraged the abandonment of the personal baggage that the actor frequently brings to the rehearsal environment.

Inhibition, a state of mind that results in the performer being closed and guarded for fear of exposing themselves, will constrain the actor's intuitive responses and place limits on full creative participation within a workshop. In this regard, one of Johnstone's techniques is to 'absolve' the actor from any responsibility towards their creative offspring. He arrives at

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[24] *The New Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (2001) defines intuition as 'the ability to understand or know something immediately, without conscious reasoning.' By comparison it defines the 'innate' as being 'inborn; natural.'

[25] First published in 1979, Keith Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* is a more concise and anecdotal text than Viola Spolin's and he visibly draws from personal events to make his points. The text offers fewer improvisation games but takes a questioning approach, drawing the reader's attention to the significance of creating an environment in which to 'play' and learn.

this point of exemption by letting the teacher take responsibility for the work: 'I explain that if the students fail they're to blame me ....it's obvious that they should blame me, since I'm supposed to be the expert; and if I give them the wrong material, they'll fail; and if I give them the right material, then they'll succeed' (Johnstone, 1989: 29). By adopting this seemingly self-effacing stance, he empowers the acting student and in doing so redefines the pupil-teacher 'status'[26].   Johnstone asserts that improvisation becomes possible through relinquishing control. He gives the actor permission to let go: 'when it's their turn to take part they're to come out and just do what they're asked to, and see what happens. It's this decision not to try and control the future, which allows the students to be spontaneous.' (ibid: 32) Johnstone's approach is very similar to Spolin's, in that both practitioners frame their work within the context of theatre 'games' in order to spawn improvised material; where emphasis is placed on eroding boundaries of the critical self and standing down the 'watcher at the gates of the mind' (ibid: 79).

The connection between Spolin and Johnstone is of particular relevance to this study. Like the acting student, I have found it necessary to relax directorial controls and align myself to the ethos of having 'permission' to play, a condition that Spolin and Johnstone have sought to encourage and promote. In the case of *Blood Offering* (2005), this entailed 'handing over' and 'letting go' of the editorial controls linked to narrative and character development, which proved to be a problem in terms of shooting and editing the material. In terms of my work with *Birdman* (2008) I had to take a step back and examine the rules of play that were required to make improvisation a successful creative experience. As Spolin says, 'Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and

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[26] Johnstone illustrates that when starting a workshop he adopts a 'low status' to make the students feel comfortable. 'The first thing I do when I meet a group of new students is (probably) to sit on the floor. I play low status, and I'll explain that if the students fail they're to blame *me*……I play low status physically but my actual status is going up, since only a very confident and experienced person would put the blame for failure on himself' (Johnstone1989:29).

act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is a time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression.' (1999: 4) Essentially, it is as important for the director of an improvised film to be receptive to the boundary challenges offered by the improvisation process, as it is for the performers who are working on the improvisational film. It raises the spectre of who is in control within an improvised performance and when is it appropriate and necessary to step back from 'controlling the development' to a position where you can let the action unfold, as exemplified in the production of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The ability of the director to explore the materiality of the narrative and film form in a relaxed, permissive and organic way presented an ideal that I wished to work towards. However, as will become apparent, this ideal was repeatedly challenged due to the technical demands of the film form and a personal expectation that I needed to maximize the potential of the actors and steer their sense of playing within a loose structure for the material.

Improvising the 'Ordinary'

In further formulating a methodology I paused to consider the extent to which improvisation could be seen to make claims upon the real. Mike Leigh and Penny Woolcock both use improvisation to help 'authenticate' a dramatic reality and bring a sense of the 'ordinary' to the screen. Paul Clements has said of Leigh's work 'Reduced to their storylines his plays and films appear, as he says himself, banal.' (1983: 58). In setting aside the requirements for high-energy action driven genre films of Hollywood, the improvised film is better suited as a vehicle for dealing with the emotional complexities found in personal relationships and struggles that are linked to the everyday challenges of 'real lives'.

One of the key challenges for the actor and director is to maintain a sense of the real within the improvisation; to use the process as a genuine vehicle for exploring the depths of character, resisting the temptation of turning the material into a 'sketch'. In 1963, while teaching improvisation at the Royal Court Theatre Studio, Keith Johnstone observed that 'the actors couldn't reproduce 'ordinary' conversation.' (1989: 33). In spite of Johnstone's direction to the actors not to joke or be clever he found the actors 'work remained unconvincing…… they were forever striving to latch on to 'interesting' ideas. If casual conversations really were motiveless, and operated by chance, why was it impossible to reproduce them in the studio?'(ibid).

By asking students to pitch their 'status just a little above or below' their acting partner, the work became 'transformed' (ibid). The scenes became 'authentic', and actors seemed marvellously observant and '[s]uddenly we understood that every inflection and movement implies status, and that no action is due to chance, or really "motiveless" '(ibid).

Evidently, Johnstone's observation and subsequent direction unlocked the way in which his actors improvised their material, helping to reveal how the shift of a characters status would ebb and flow within conversation and how status could be manipulated to the benefit of the scene. Whether this technique helped to create characterisations that were more real than those drawn from the pages of a screenplay, is clearly a matter that will be addressed in the analysis of my work. However, the application of technique in relation to constructing a real performance is a problematic area to resolve, particularly when working with non-actors who don't necessarily see that they are constructing a 'real' character that is an extension of themselves. Commenting on the notion of reality in performance Michael Kirby invites us to question the notion of reality, when being applied to the description of acting and he argues that 'the word "reality" has little usefulness when applied to acting. From one point of view,

all acting is, by definition, "unreal" because pretence, impersonation, and so forth are involved. From another point of view, all acting is real. (2002:47)'

Although 'pretence' is involved in acting, clearly the job of an actor is to 'hide the traces of pretence' from the viewer, in order to make the enactment seem real and truthful. The ultimate aim of 'realism' being to make the viewer believe the illusion. The belief that improvisation offers a distinct approach to creating onscreen performances, assumes that improvised performance creates material that has its own aesthetic properties, which may therefore distinguish it from other branches of acting. The view that improvisation promotes a 'life-like' or 'true-to-life' quality, because the work is produced in the moment and has not been filtered through a script, is a matter for further debate. This train of thought sets up the implicit challenge that a scripted performance, in contrast to that which is improvised, results in character and performance that is not 'true-to-life'. Yet, we know that scripted performances can be very life-like, so to what extent does the challenge that improvisation offers is more life-like performance hold true?

Improvising Conversation

Using improvisation to create and discover aspects of character, through dialogue and interaction, is a working practice familiar to practitioners in live theatre, particularly evident in Theatresports. Successful improvisation stands or falls on the basis of the actor's ability to invent materials in the moment. Clearly, we are all capable of engaging in conversation with each other, however, the barriers of shared experience, age, cultural background and so forth are factors that clearly affect the success, or otherwise, of an adhock and spontaneous interaction. So when confronted with watching a filmed conversation that has no obvious

purpose, certainly a purpose relative to the broader narrative of the film, we can find the experience frustrating and may certainly lead to a stasis within the film. The danger with using improvisation as an exploratory process is that the actors may never get to the heart of the matter and may meander across a broad territory. Using the interview with Penny Woolcock as an example of this condition (appendix pp.172-198), we may note a broad conversation that navigates around the experiences of making the 'Tina' films and working methods with improvisation. As can be seen from the verbatim transcript[27], there are many points where the conversation digresses, particularly, as the ideas set up through one train of thought create associations, which then triggers a secondary train of thought. Invariably, this conversation which was intended to gather lots of information, will not necessarily be concise, and in this unedited form may appear to lack focus and direction. Although we might characterise this conversation as a rambling affair, we can say that it nevertheless reveals character and point of view on both sides. If this conversation were to be edited, then the writer would be able to release specific information in a more direct manner, with fewer deviations and over a far shorter period of time.

It is important to remember that the value of improvisation is to discover character and point of view through such play. Judith Weston says that improvisation should be thought of 'as if' (Weston 1996:266) and goes on to state that improvisation is not a performance. However, if we are to say that the condition of improvisation is its 'spontaneity', then certainly all film performances should contain the 'what if' quality, least they end up looking premeditated and not genuine pieces of interpersonal communication. Inevitably, this playfulness will result in going up blind alleys and exploring areas that, though relevant to the

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[27] I intended to keep the transcript in its verbatim form, in order to keep track of the direction this conversation took. Though I had ordered and prepared specific questions in advance, at the point of interviewing it became easier to depart from my plans and improvise the conversation, in order to maintain a flow and casual quality of conversation. Of itself, this conversation meanders and does not attempt to present a dramatic exchange.

actors and characters circumstances, may not fit into a larger planned structure. Depending on the director's point of view, this may be a joy of the improvisation process or a curse. The fact that Mike Leigh distils the output of an improvisation into a script, perhaps, indicates his concern for work that is improvised on camera. This is a point I shall return to in the analysis of *Fallen Angels* and *Blood Offering*.

Film form and the use of specific craft techniques may be effectively used to suggest liveness. Through the use of a handheld camera, shots can be made overtly wobbly, poorly framed, out of focus. Nowadays, with digital filming formats being the normal production choice, shots and may be long and uninterrupted. Historically this was not the case. When using film as a production medium the duration of a shot was regulated by the amount of film in a magazine, which in the case of 16mm was a little over ten minutes. The camera operator, working in a live production context, constantly shifts their point of view to obtain the best possible image in a given situation. They alter the framing and may 'zoom in' to capture details or even physically move the camera closer. The camera operator may have to alter the exposure if the scene is too dark or too light. In all cases, such intervention reminds the spectator of the film form, it makes the technology overt and draws attention to the fact that we are viewing an unrehearsed event. By contrast, the institutional mode of shooting an interview is to hide the machinery, the practice, to make the technology and medium 'invisible'. Incorporating this vérité aesthetic into any filmed interview, conversation suggests to the viewer that they are seeing and event that is unrehearsed, spontaneous, a product of the moment. By contrast, if we anchor the camera to a tripod and barely move the camera, cutting from one static shot to the next, the spectator becomes aware of a controlled and contrived influence; something that connotes being 'staged'. With this in mind, improvised conversation that is defined by static camerawork, may suggest contrivance and artifice, something 'other' than the spontaneous, immediate and life-like. Therefore, we

might assume that the more we move the camera, the more unpredictable, immediate and 'present' the footage seems to be. This example, therefore, raises the question as to whether the impact of improvisation is more heightened when amplified and manipulated through the artifice of film form. Does *The Blair Witch Project* [1999] seem more improvised than *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) because of its extreme, video diary quality and first person approach?

At the most fundamental level, how can the improvised conversation played out between two non-actors be differentiated from the filmed and spontaneous conversations between two professional actors? Why is one context an act of performance and the other seemingly not? Once the improvisation has been mediated, can we not argue the status of the improvised event has been shifted? The simple act of filming a conversation elevates the status of the event, by giving it prominence. In effect the filmmaker is saying to his audience *look at this!* We must, therefore, accept that the recording of the improvised performance exaggerates, amplifies and elevates the significance of the filmed event, by virtue of the fact that the filmmaker is 'claiming' the event as being worthy of recording and reproducing.

When examining the concept of 'realism' within the improvised screen performance, the scholar must analyse the quality of expression, particularly, how effectively or not the actor articulates emotion through their body language. The perception of the improvised performance being raw and not controlled is, possibly, one of the measures by which directors and audiences can gauge the quality of an actor's expression. The proposal being, that improvisation leads towards less refined work, whereas more polished, precise and concise work suggests that the performance is less likely to have been improvised. When taking into consideration the fact that non-actors have a limited skillset, the extent to which we can measure the actors' individual contributions and their ability to feign characterisation starts to present a problem in terms of measuring the level of feigning (Kirby, 2002).

In commenting on his experiences of film acting, Michael Caine writes, "Movie Acting is a delicate blend of careful preparation and spontaneity. The art of new-minting thoughts and dialogue comes from listening and reacting as if for the first time" (1997:68) He attributes spontaneity in film acting to listening: "Your lines should sound like spontaneous conversation, not like acting at all. And that comes from actively listening". [ibid: 69]. In effect, Caine is describing what many would define as being an interpersonal communication exchange between two people: "Listen and react. If you're thinking about your lines, you're not listening. Take your response from the other person's eyes, listen to what he says as though you have never heard it before." [ibid] Caine's advice does not suggest that film acting is driven by heightened exaggeration of emotion, rather that you should be looking for an honest response based on actual listening. In addressing ideas about preparation for improvisation, it is important to consider how the improvisation may be prepared and how a script may be integrated into the workflow.

Improvising the Script

The script provides a tight structure for the filmmaking process. Having a structure helps the actors to reach known narrative goals. How they reach them is defined by the quality and inventiveness of the actor's performance, the processes of en-acted interpersonal communication exchanges.

At a basic level, the improvisation process can be seen to be on a par with the practices and workflow found in documentary production. The documentary filmmaker typically works without a script and spends considerable time in the cutting room looking for moments that have been snatched from life, moments of poignancy that evidence the central observations and predicaments of the film's characters. Paradoxically, the scripted drama

attempts to forge such moments of poignancy and conflict through writing, which the director and actor hope to synthesise a series of invented spontaneous exchanges within their on-screen performance. Unlike the documentary[28], which is burdened with the responsibility for 'truthful' representation, the dramatized event is permitted to be reshot, as many times as necessary, in order to improve performance and clarity of expression within the material. Notwithstanding, the director must know the story, what it is they want to achieve from the material, specifically: what will this scene say to the audience? How do I want the material to affect the viewer emotionally? What cinematic devices and techniques will be needed to achieve this goal?

In structuring the classical film narrative, certain key decisions will have been made to achieve a cause and effect sequencing that is logical and develops a sense of tension that can be directed towards a climax. Specifically, the writer will define the character's world and their place in that world and identify the obstacles that a character must overcome to achieve their personal goals. Therefore, working with improvisation, it seems only logical that the director needs some sort of plan or route, as the filmmaking process is a distracting intercession within the process of performance. When using a single camera to film your story, you necessarily have to fragment what would otherwise be a fluid linear performance. Once the establishing or master shot of an improvised scene has been photographed, what follows, by way of shooting other material within the scene, will typically obey the conventions of the Institutional Mode of Representation (see footnote 3) and traditions of film grammar. Thereafter, in terms of shot/reverse-shot filming strategies, the actor loses the freedom to improvise in an unconstrained way. Instead, the actor has to 're-enact' that which was defined in the initial master shot. Alternatively, if you have several cameras,

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[28] The notion of staging a documentary is a highly contentious issue. However, we can regard documentaries as being staged by virtue of the fact that the director chooses the subject matter, who will be interviewed (which is a form of casting), the locations for filming, lighting, editing strategies, the questions asked and what to include and exclude from the edit to direct the viewer's attention in a specific way.

simultaneously recording a performance from different angles, then you have more creative options in the edit. In single camera production, repetition of action and dialogue is necessary to provide the 'overlapping' required to edit the material in a continuous and un-interrupted manner. Alternatively, one could approach filming improvisations in a wide shot, as Woody Allen divulged, '..the reason he uses one wide shot for most of his whole scenes is partly because its quicker and cheaper, but mostly it is for the actors, because it is a way to "let them talk" and to allow overlapping" (cited in Weston, 1996: 86).

Within long-form improvisation the actor is able to develop a 'virtual script' for their character. This is achieved by harnessing a set of values and inventing background experiences, imagined relationships, holidays, hobbies and pursuits; all of which can be called on to provide the character's raison d'être. So when we say that improvisation is an unscripted process, whilst there might be no written script to speak of, through informed preparation the actor is able to develop a residual knowledge that will inform how their character is able to react within a given circumstance. As Caine articulates '[y]ou've got to base your character on reality, not on some actor-ish memory of what reality is because, finally, the actor is in charge of the effect he wants' (1997: 89). Furthermore, 'When you are stealing details to build characters on, steal only what was real in the first place, not some dusty stereotype' (ibid: 92). Within both long and short-form improvisation, the actor is usually offered a 'starting point' for the improvised narrative. This starting point provides a context and may take the form of a title, a costume, a setting, or an active question or situation, all of which provide the actor with a narrative goal or something to play against. Structural choices such as how to start, how to develop and how to close the material, the beginning, middle and end, may be worked out during the improvisation and may also be enhanced through decisions made in the film's edit.

In producing the *Blair Witch Project* Sanchez & Myrick prepared each actor by providing a character breakdown. Actor Jim King plays the part of JIM MAYNARD and I have included examples of the character breakdown (p.227) as well as the filming instructions communicated via email. As can be seen, King was directed to learn the character background and then 'play out' the role in any way that was appropriately in character. Of course it helps that the film was shot as a documentary. Germane to the process is that Sánchez gives permission for King to respond in anyway "Act like you would if this happened to you in real life" (p.225) the only absolute being he could not break his character in any way and '[d]on't ask them what you are supposed to say." (ibid.)

Developing a Methodology for Practice

This survey, highlighting the facets of improvisation, revealed the complexity of the practical task ahead. It became evident that it wouldn't be possible to distil these ideas and demands into one practical vehicle for evaluation. Therefore, my intention was to evaluate different facets of improvisation across three distinct projects. As this was an exercise in producing cinema, all materials would be filmed on location.

The first project, which evolved as *Fallen Angels* (2005), was intended to be an improvisation without specific limitations. The aim was to 'play' and discover character and narrative through exploration. It would be shot on location and the cameras would merely observe the action. The aim of the second project, which evolved as *Blood Offering* (2005/6), was to develop a narrative structure based on the findings of the first improvisation project and then improvise key scenes[29].

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[29] Initially, I had thought there would be a further step, whereby I would take these improvised scenes and turn them into a script, further distilling the material. The actors would 'learn lines', which would serve as

The third project, *Birdman* (2008) and *Graduate Workshop* (2010), was instigated to explore how improvisation can be seen to inform scripted character. Both projects were designed to provide evidence for a phenomenon that is often discussed by filmmakers and actors, specifically that improvisation strengthens character and performance, but which has a dearth of filmed evidence in the public domain.

placeholders. The scenes woould be rehot and the actors would be required to stay within the framework; of course there would be the possibility of shortening or finding new ways of articulating the material. It became apparent in shooting *Blood Offering*, certainly in post production, that this step might not add anything to the material or discoveries about improvisation.

Chapter 4: Practice-Based Research

This chapter examines my various approaches to improvisation through practice-based-research (PBR). I deconstruct the process of 'devising' character, a journey that begins with casting and research strategies, culminating in the maturity of character at the point of filming. Inevitably, such an exploration will lead to questioning the ways in which the improvisation of character informs the development and structuring of narratives, thereby offering a counterpoint to the industry norm of a pre-planned character arc and 'journey' that is mapped out through the screenplay. My intention then is to reveal the processes in which a set of 'inner values' are defined and to question how these psychological contexts provide foci for the creation of film characters, furthermore, to evidence how improvisation has been used as a development tool for exploring the motivations of a character within a given context.

Characters are fabrications, whether made 'on the spur of the moment' through a practical and physical exploration, or 'written' from the memories of faces and situations that are fleshed out on the page. Syd Field, scriptwriting teacher and author of *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* states '[c]haracter is the essential foundation of your screenplay. It is the heart and soul and nervous system of your story. Before you put a word on paper, you must know your character. KNOW YOUR CHARACTER.' (Field, 1984: 22)

The improvised character may be wrought out of shimmering notions and elements that are fused together in the fraction of a second. By contrast, the written character is agonised over, teased and stretched out from a range of character types and is designed to operate in a specific mode and follow an ordered trajectory.

In the opening paragraphs of 'Toward a Physical Characterization', Tortsov, the fictional director and professor of acting, makes the following declaration to his eager students:

> Most frequently, especially among talented actors, the physical materialisation of a character to be created emerges of its own accord, once the right inner values have been established.

(Stanislavski, 2000: 5)

Tortsov's statement implicitly draws our attention to a somewhat 'hidden' facet of the actor's condition: recognition of 'the self' and a responsibility for developing emotional and intellectual expressions for 'the self of character'. The complex relationship between these two distinct, yet interconnected, identities is an interesting dynamic and would, in most cases, represent a specific challenge for the actor working with improvisation; given that this mode of production lacks certainty and fixity, as the character evolves out of the filmmaking process, reacting to the changing stimuli of each scene. Of course, Tortsov's comments suggest that it is only through establishing a set of inner values that an actor will have the fixity necessary to construct a character. Tortsov's noteworthy remarks are particularly relevant to my investigation as they provide an essential point of reference regarding the actor's inherent 'state of mind'; suggesting that it is perhaps a precursor to the externalisation of character. Furthermore, they provide a springboard for a much broader dialogue about the nature of character development within the improvised film. If we accept the premise that character-based improvisation begins with lack of specific character details, foundations that a screenwriter would normally place into the script, and we acknowledge that such fixity is required to build a character, then this situation leaves one to ponder whether it is possible for

improvisation to work effectively within the continuum of a film's production on a moment by moment basis. At what point does a character become locked down, fixed and immovable? Irrespective of the fact that Tortsov and his budding student Kostya Nazvanov are fictional characters, the journey towards understanding inner processes of creating character is, nevertheless, adeptly played out within two of Stanislavski's seminal works: *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavski, 1980) and *Building A Character* (Stanislavski, 2000). Personally, I found these texts to be a useful muse for exploring the 'hidden' craft of acting. Though they do not specifically approach improvisation techniques, the mini 'classroom' narratives that are offered up contain many scenes that evidence the spontaneous process of creativity and moments of self-discovery; acts of the creative process that the reader is encouraged to view as being 'typical' within the rehearsal space. It is not my intention to focus on these spontaneous events, as I will defer to my own practical examples gathered from film acting, rather to use them as a point of reference in analysing the process of inner character development within the improvised film. Significantly, these texts attempt to provide a bridge to our understanding of the thought processes that underpin the creation of a role. Despite the fact that Kostya's acting experiences are 'invented' and overtly 'dramatised', the dramatised accounts in which Kostya discovers and reveals aspects of 'the self' and emerging craft skills do appear to have a credible strain of 'truth' to them. One must suppose that such insights were born out of Stanislavski's personal observations, as he wrestled with identifying, labelling and synthesising the distinct phases of building a character. Whilst it is unlikely that these forays into the actor's consciousness can stand up to rigorous empirical testing, I would argue that Stanislavski's texts offer a compelling articulation about the psychology of character and provide a useful paradigm and mirror against which I can test my own practical findings.

Field (1984: 40), shows how easily the external facets of character can be developed by posing a series of questions to his writing students. The process happens in minutes through a 'dry' and factual question and answer approach. By contrast Kostya, the fictional Stanislavskian student actor, takes an experiential approach to finding his character, spending days exploring a worn coat, borrowed from the costume department, and he only discovers his character under pressure whilst being grilled by Tortsov (Stanislavski, 2000: 17-20). Notwithstanding the context of discovery, an effective character will need to be informed through the imagination in which the actor thinks about upbringing, personal successes and failures, cultural influences, parental and peer pressures, occupation, hobbies, ambition, desires and so forth. It matters little whether character has been conceived through active rehearsal or the process of writing. It should be recognised that within the writing process, 'improvised' choice leads the hand in certain directions and not others, as is evidenced in my writing of *Birdman* (2008). Of course, many practical aspects of production inform, create and further develop the sense of character. Casting might equally be considered an extension of the writing process and for a director, such as Mike Leigh, casting can be considered as the beginning of his 'writing' process. Likewise, placing characters into a specific mise-en-scene, whether on paper or in the 'actuality' of a film location can be considered part of the writing process and it further defines character in relation to their environment, thereby providing a visual context for the character in action. Costume and props that are specifically linked to a character may not exist on the page, but nevertheless offer further enhancement. Ultimately, the written character has still to be played out and the improvised character must be developed externally and internally. In both cases, the verbal and non-verbal articulations of character must be re-presented and codified through a body language that is ideally character-specific.

Syd Field's simple paradigm (Fig. 1) demonstrates the dual facets of character. The 'Interior'
- that which forms character and the 'Exterior' – everything that depicts and reveals character.

CHARACTER

(*from birth till present*)   (*from start of movie to end*)

INTERIOR . . . . EXTERIOR

FORMS | CHARACTER   REVEALS | CHARACTER

character biography   define the need   action is character
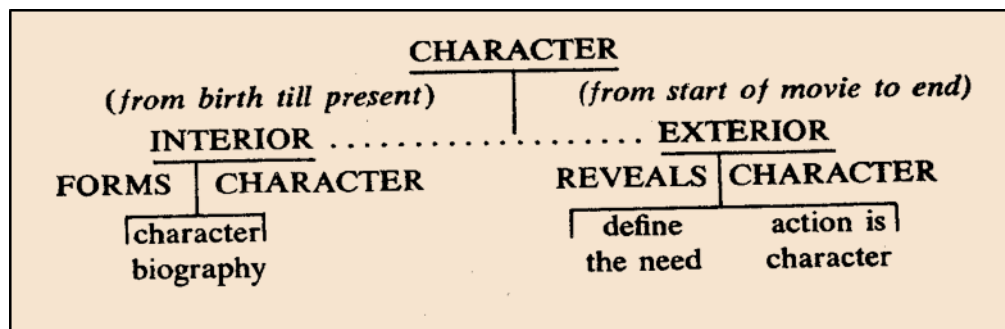
Fig. 1

In commenting on the exterior world of character, Field goes on to say that one of the
underlying principles of constructing a character is to think in terms of 'ACTION IS
CHARACTER – what a person does is what he is, not what he says'. (1984: 37). Field is of
course referring to the daily routines and contexts in which a character operates as well as
alluding to the bigger dynamics of character action. As the narrative develops, the character is
forced to react in bolder and more substantial ways; driven by the imperatives created from
the dramatic context. Field comments on how characters should be continually tested through
action and reaction, as the bar is raised ever higher and the dramatic pressure piled on. In
developing story material for *Blood Offering* and then *Birdman*, I found this anchoring point
of view useful. Action does not always have to equate to big spectacle. In the character-
driven work of smaller films, the dramatic curve of a character may result in the character
undergoing a nervous and or physical breakdown, for example Scott, the driving tutor in
Happy Go Lucky (2008) and likewise Lilith's incapacity to deal with the bloody situation
confronting her at the end of *Blood Offering* (2008).

Field asserts that the construction of character needs to be built around an
understanding of a character's personality, specifically: Attitude, Point of View and Need. He

asks 'What does your character want to achieve, or get, during the course of your screenplay?' (1984: 31) Essentially, these elements belong to Field's 'interior' world of character and the writer is encouraged to explore and engage with these elements when creating a biography.

Dramatic Functions of Improvised Character

The conflicts played out between characters are as much evidenced in the improvised film as they are within a larger scale Hollywood film. However, in the improvised work of Mike Leigh and Penny Woolcock, the depth of the characterisation that is evidenced is perhaps more complex. Leigh deals with characters that tend not to be so obviously polarised, as Leigh says: "One of the conventions of classic Hollywood filmmaking is that there are goodies and baddies, but in my films, you don't really have goodies and baddies. Everybody gets a fair crack at the whip." (Brunette, 1991: 31)

In this statement, Leigh's position in not using characterisation as a cipher for a particular moral stance is unquestionable. That does not mean his characters are amoral or lack decisiveness and a sense of purpose; rather that, like their 'real' counterparts Leigh's characters are ambiguous and remain so until the end. By adopting this position, Leigh manages to avoid the trap of using character to consciously manipulate narrative in a classical and institutional way. Whether he succeeds or not is open to question. As Leigh says:

> We use a real person as a jumping-off point. I always get the actors to talk about
> different people they have known. Then, the character develops and expands. My job
> is to push and pull it and cajole it and bully it in the direction of what's dramatic and
> cinematic (Stone, 1991: 28).

The success of Leigh's practice is that it instils the sense that the characters appear to be feeling their way through life. Leigh's films clearly capture a dramatic event and his characters are still required to 'prove' themselves and undertake a process of transformation. But it is often the case that the function of character is revealed through dialogue. The function of dialogue within an improvisation raises many questions about the colouration of character and narrative purpose. In classical narratives, dialogue tends to have a literary flourish. Suffice to say, the idea of a monologue in which the narrative is explored through language is generally regarded as a theatrical mode of expression, and as such can be viewed as non-naturalistic. Institutionally, the idea of stasis within a motion picture is something most directors tend to avoid. When confronted with filming a long speech, the tendency is towards fragmentation, and the camera so often becomes a mobile force, directed to track in or around the person, cutting or dissolving from one shot to another in order to provide a different angle on the subject. By contrast, the author of a stage play designs the kinetic effect through varying the length of syntax and sentences and anticipating that the actor will use inflection, tone and pace to imbue life into the speaker's expressions and thoughts. Unlike cinema, there is no external imposition on the form of a theatrical performance, whether it is improvised or scripted. By contrast, the screen performance is modified and defined through editing, whereby the juxtaposition of shots imposes artifice and modifies the kinetic pace of delivery; a modification which affects the playing and reading of a screen performance. In commenting on the use of dialogue, Field defines dialogue as a "function of character", which communicates 'information or the facts of your story to the audience. It must move the story forward. It must reveal character. Dialogue must reveal conflicts between and within characters, and emotional states and personality quirks of character.' (1984: 28).

In developing his ideas on the construction of character, Field states that the screenwriter should 'define the NEED of your character. What does your character want to achieve, or get, during the course of your screenplay?' (ibid: 31) In further exploring Field's rationale, it is possible to understand how this 'need' becomes pivotal to the dramatic structuring of character-oriented drama, whether improvised or scripted. It is the character's needs that provide both raison d'être and the dramatic engine for a story. Perhaps another way of further unpacking or developing this term is to introduce the concept of 'goals'. A need can be fairly passive unless there is a call for the character to act upon the need. Characters that have goal-orientated needs are necessarily called into action. The desire to confront their needs will require the character to confront oppositional elements and attempt resolution.

In developing ideas about the functionality of character, Field encourages the screenwriter to identify a context for the character to operate in. He states that 'Character is a point of view' and that the way in which a character sees the world is further contextualised by how this point of view is modified by attitude: 'Is your character superior in attitude or inferior? A positive or negative person?' (Field, 1984: 33) Whilst it is useful to look at improvisations produced in this way, as a formative and contextual dialogue, the characters of Leigh and Woolcock are somehow at odds with the structuralist approach of Field. Improvisations often meander, and what might seem a worthwhile avenue to explore in the workshop can later seem trite in the context of the overall development. Leigh's work-shopping of characters is akin to writing; the difficulty is knowing when to move on and when to lock down or fix information. One has to question the methodology of the workshop practice; does one repeat the improvisation over and over, changing elements, making better

and re-crafting earlier ideas? How is this different from the lone writer experimenting with phrasing and rephrasing material? If the director then leaves the rehearsal space and rewrites and distils the improvisation practice, how is this different from a team of writers working on material? In this rubric, the actor has implicitly become a writer and co-author of the work. In a Leigh film, the structure comes out of improvisations in the rehearsal space:

> The thing is to develop the whole world of the characters and that's not done in theory but in practice […] I don't do it in my head or on paper. There's a lot of discussion about the characters. We create and live through years and years of their experiences. There's a lot of improvisation, most of which has nothing to do with what winds up on the screen. One moves forward without necessarily knowing where we're going. (Stone, 1991: 28)

In a Woolcock film, the structure exists beforehand. In evaluating the performance in a Woolcock film, we must remember that the actors are working towards a defined resolution or set target. It is not possible to identify how the actors' choices have shaped the material, because the material was already structured beforehand. When asked as to whether she structured the stories for a specific narrative effect, Woolcock replied 'Yeah absolutely in a very conventional way, in a sense there's a sort of three act structure. There's the set up - the various things, then you've got the second act, and then, at the end, everything is sort of resolved in some way.' (Woolcock, 2004) Similarly, Leigh also develops a structure, but this comes out of the improvisations and exploratory work:

> I write a structure that is very brief, like three pages. Scene 1: Wendy at dancing class. Scene 2: Wendy goes home. And each scene is built and rehearsed on location and

built up through lots of discussion and very thorough rehearsal until its ready, and then
it gets shot" (Brunette, 1991: 31)

Leigh's praxis clearly relies on extensive work-shopping and 'rehearsal', and this would seem
to be contra to the associations of improvised practice. But what is meant by rehearsal and to
what extent do these preparations inform or railroad the performance?

4.1 DARK SUMMERS: Fallen Angels & Blood Offering.

Falling Down with *Fallen Angels*: Learning to walk with improvisation

Fallen Angels (2005) is a fifteen minute filmed exercise that explores the staging and cinematic possibilities of a free form improvisation[30]. Photographed at St. Pancras and Islington Cemetery in September 2005, the film is a simple model, a maquette and forerunner of a later project entitled *Blood Offering* (2005). It was made with the intention of identifying what was dramatically possible when using improvisation in a pared down and simplified form. I aspired to producing moments that captured slices of life in the raw. I believed that by removing the structure of a script from the improvisation I could get closer to characters and narrative that naturally evolved. That improvisation could be used as a tool to facilitate the representation of human existence, as an un-dramatised condition of everyday experience was intriguing. I was particularly interested in slower paced, unabridged and reflective performance exchanges, wherein actors appeared to be genuinely taking their cues from each other, as opposed to the snappy, well formed and goal centred dialogue of mainstream film and television. Paradoxically, this approach would entail removing all preconceived notions of a dramatic construct from the performance equation. It should be said that one of my key interests was drilling down to the core of an actor's experience within a performance

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[30] I use this term in a loose way, partly to acknowledge that there are different impetuses that drive and inform the improvisation process. The term free improvisation was coined in the 60's as an alternative to the more structured improvisations found in Jazz.

'In Britain, in the mid-60s, free improvisation (often just called "improv") developed out of free jazz, eventually becoming a separate and distinct music. Free jazz gradually removed conventional structure - chords, melodic themes, regular rhythm — but free improvisation took their absence as its starting point. Essentially, free improvisation has no rules; in Derek Bailey's words, it is "playing without memory".' (Eales, 2005) http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=18638 - retrieved 28-05-2010.

environment. Looking at the 'banal' and every day details that can be reproduced within a performance, rather than driving the character headlong through a series of emotional imperatives. Whilst I accept that human experience is often driven by such emotional imperatives and desires, we must also concede that much time is spent in a more simple state of being, occupied in our own equilibrium and working with a more 'neutral' set of emotions.

One of the main objectives for this exercise was to let the actors construct and discover their characters' identity through the use of costume and action, working on location as opposed to a studio. It is worth noting that *Fallen Angels*, as well as the other films submitted for this research, including *Blood Offering* (2005) and *Birdman* (2008) have been created as experiments that challenge my understanding of the improvisation process, the relationship between performer and director, and the relationship of improvisation to film form. As such, these films are not pieces of 'entertainment' in their own right and are not intended for exhibition outside this context of this research. This is not to say the films are not being made for an audience, rather, that the expectations of the audience needs to be informed and determined by the aims and context of the research, which is to explore 'certain tendencies' of improvisation in relation to film production.

Fallen Angels is the first of my filmed exercises and was produced during a period in which I was formulating my initial ideas concerning improvisation and engaging with background reading. I consider the film to be a tentative foray, where my aim was to acquire an elementary understanding of improvisation, having had no previous experience of using it within my earlier filmmaking practice. After reflecting on my initial literature review, I had come to feel rather daunted by the challenges that improvisation posed and wondered what hidden pitfalls would be revealed when using improvisation to construct a film. One of my

immediate concerns was the absence of any critical commentaries or accounts of improvisation practice in relation to film and video production. Furthermore, the literature that I had encountered tended to approach improvisation from the standpoint of the performer and considered the ways in which material could be developed within the context of a live performance. When evaluated in this way it is perhaps easy to believe that improvisation is a process entirely controlled by the performer. In taking this stance, it is equally too easy to ignore the fact that filmed performance is being mediated and therefore is being controlled as much by the camera and edit as by the verisimilitude of the mise-en-scene and conventions of the genre. As I was to discover, the intervention of the camera into the improvisation process offered a number of technical constraints and challenges to devising work, particularly regarding how the use of a vérité filming style could both support and detract the viewer's attention from the performance process. The main issue here was that the visual style and production 'conventions' associated with documentary, and its sub-categories, such as the mock-documentary, can blur the boundaries around the evaluation of what 'performance' and 'acting' might be in relation to the documentary form. When beginning to explore ideas around the notion of acting within the mock-documentary, Michael Kirby's essay *Acting and Not-acting* (2002) proved an interesting starting point, as he attempts to classify the varying degrees to which an actor could be regarded as acting. Kirby's position is that we are fundamentally capable of recognising when people are acting, as he says '[i]n most cases, acting and not-acting are relatively easy to recognize and identify. In a performance, we usually know when a person is acting and when not' (2002: 40). Of course, this raises the question 'how do we know when a person is acting or not?' The problem lies, not such much with Kirby's attempt to classify the point at which an actor can be regarded as acting[31], but

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[31] However, I do not share Kirby's view that we can measure 'the amount of acting' (2002: 40), as this is

that his approach in measuring the 'amount' or degrees of acting is isolated from the contexts of production, for example, the mise-en-scene, genre and techniques of filming. I draw attention to this, because I feel the degree of 'realism' that one can attribute and measure in a filmed performance is made possible through the details of staging and, as is the case with documentary, is further qualified by the methods of documentation; in other words, the filmmakers' techniques. Therefore we must be certain that the process of acting in film is something that cannot be separated from the medium, the genre and the effects of mise-en-scene. By contrast, we might see that the theatre is inherently an 'unreal' environment and, no matter how good the mise-en-scene, our physical relationship to the 'proscenium' and fixed point of view remind us that we are spectators to an event. Obviously, this relationship can be challenged when the spectator is presented with staging in which they are situated within the performance space, which could be someone's kitchen or shed, and in this context their physical relationship to the performers and material changes further.

In reviewing the 'acting – not acting debate' a number of key points emerge from Kirby's commentary that need further qualification and examination. The most pressing question being, how do you measure the effects of staging on the performance; the difference between performances within the controlled space, versus, improvisation in the live space? Furthermore, how do you quantify the actor's skills that are evidenced in precise pacing and delivery, against the open and lose conversational interactions of an improvised performance? In principle, I am happy to accept, that '[a]cting can be said to exist in the smallest and

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dependent on the perception of the view, quality and context of performance. What scale do we use to carry out such measurement? Whose perception, that of the actor or spectator, do we use to measure the amount of acting within a performance? What points of reference and scale do you use to measure this perception? Commenting on the value of costume in relation to creating character, Kirby does identify that within the "costume continuum", and he uses the example of a person gradually putting on clothes that are representative of a cowboy, the point at which a viewer can specifically identify a character is dependent on 'place or physical context, and it undoubtedly varies from person to person.' (ibid: 41).

simplest action that involves pretence' (Kirby, 2002:43). However, what is not measurable, but equally defines the degrees of an actor's process, are the internal markers created and embedded by the actor in order to underpin the characterisation. Thus, we cannot accurately evaluate the extent to which an actor might be pretending. Therefore, and running contrary to Kirby's scale, perhaps the biggest paradox for the film actor, in order to create the impression of realism in their performance, is not to pretend and not to act.

Discovering the Fallen Angels

The idea for *Fallen Angels* evolved after discovering a copy of *The Satanic Bible* (LaVey 1969) in a second hand bookshop. Having reading and discussed this book with a colleague, I was directed to the work of Bob Carlos Clarke and a collection of photographs entitled *The Dark Summer* (Clarke, 1985). Clarke presents an interesting collection of black and white photographs exploring the themes of power and sexual representation through gothic and neo-noir imaging. His models display an acute self-awareness, which is in keeping with the genre and implied 'characterisations'. From these eclectic influences a creative enquiry emerged which compelled me to explore questions around the 'values' we place on our identity and fantasies and how these sit in relation to the material self and our systems of belief: concepts that seemed to permeate and traverse both Clarke's imagery and LaVey's writing.

During this formative period, I had also started re-evaluating the challenges posed by documentary production, specifically the representation of its subjects and notions of 'performance' that were exhibited by the documented subject. In thinking about the eccentric

characters of Edie Beale and her mother in *Grey Gardens* (1975), the over confident high wire walker Philippe Petit in *Man on Wire* (2008), and the self aware documentarian Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man* (2005), I began to ponder what the boundaries between acting and not-acting might be. By definition, these documentary subjects were non-actors and yet they clearly commanded the screen and presented themselves in a particular manner. Furthermore, as I analysed the processes of production surrounding *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), I began to contemplate the ways in which the documentary form has been hybridized through the blending of other genres, such as the horror and suspense film, and how this had further complicated the notion of improvised performance, particularly when using actors within a mock-documentary context who are playing extensions of themselves. I found this position interesting because even though Heather Donahue is an actress, she appears as her named 'self' in the role of a documentary filmmaker in *The Blair Witch Project*, as do her colleagues 'Josh' Leonard and 'Mike' Williams. The directors Dan Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez have clearly decided not to assign different names to the roles, which leaves one to speculate the extent to which the actors were actually treated as 'independent' characters during the making of the film.

The premise of *Fallen Angels* was built around the notion of two friends having a 'fun' day out at the local cemetery, if such a feat were possible. The context for the film was that a student photographer is taking a series of photographs for her forthcoming exhibition. The film comprises four tableaux, or scenes, wherein the action of each scene is structured around the need to find a 'pose' for the model. In directing the cast I suggested that the actors should use the location in any way they wished, in order to discover the space as well as establish a shared memory that they could recall at a later time. The thinking behind this

production strategy was that by providing a set of experiences, the actors would lay the foundations of a friendship, so that when they took their road trip a few weeks later the actors would have a bank of experiences to draw from. Time permitting, the aim would be to create a series of back-stories linked to actual experiences and combine these with other invented episodes. In some respects, my planned approach to developing character 'histories', though never fully realised, was not too dissimilar from some of the development processes employed by Mike Leigh, for example, quizzing actors on their personal biographies using information which has been worked through in the character breakdown[32.]

The primary aim of *Fallen Angels* was therefore to shoot material that could represent an instance in the lives of these imaginary characters. To facilitate this, my intention was to drop the camera into the action, to become a fly-on-the-wall, and let the staging happen in a spontaneous way. It was to be a kind of Happening. This process clearly bares resemblance to the documentary practices of Direct Cinema, insofar that the filmmakers work in an 'observational'[33] way, to record and document the 'truths' that are presented. There seemed to be a clear synergy of purpose between the narcissistic exploration of their identities both on and off the camera and a quest for the truth of performance on film of the non-actor. As Mike Leigh has commented on his own practice, though not specifically in terms of cinematic style but finding the truth in your work:

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[32] The character breakdown can be found in the appendix (p. 191) and was used as a framework to help Claire and Maggie discuss their characters. Clements labels this process as 'Leigh's Quiz Club' (1986: 44). The purpose of this activity is to 'consolidate the character's subjective experience' (ibid) and to 'solidify what is already there and also to 'fill in the holes', because no matter how thoroughly the characters have been investigated there are inevitably gaps where things have never been discussed or thought about' (ibid).

[33] 'The observational documentary 'takes shape around an exhaustive depiction of everyday life, rather than around an argument about the social world….the viewer is provided with a window on reality-an idealistic (voyeuristic) spectator position'. (Hight, and Roscoe, 2001:19)

...what I say to student directors is that...we should aspire to the condition of documentary. By which I mean that when you shoot documentary, you do not question that the world you're pointing a camera at actually exists in three dimensions and that it would exist whether you filmed it or not. And if we can aspire to that condition with what the actors are doing, so that it really is in three dimensions, and really does go around corners, then the bit that we actually see, the tip of the iceberg, is going to have that solidity to it. (Brunette, 1991:32)

The next step was to cast the film. I took the decision to cast through an online actors agency. I indicated that previous experience of filmmaking was not a concern and that I was not looking for ready-made characters, as this would be an improvisation based film project. Directors often comment that, good directing is essentially good casting and Penny Woolcock had a very particular view of casting. In terms of her approach to finding actors for *Tina Goes Shopping*, she commented:

95% of getting a good performance is casting. I'm not interested in very technical acting; the sort of Meryl Streep type acting, where there's a lot to admire. I think, there are a lot of British actors like that as well. There's a very kind of thespian thing, which is 'giving this performance'…and you can see the wheels turning and admire what's going on, but you don't believe it for a second. You know some people really like that, and there's certainly a lot of craft involved in doing that, but it doesn't interest me at all. (Howe, 2004)

Mainstream casting practices are largely dictated by the financing of the film. Within a vicious economic cycle, film finance tends to follow the creative package, comprising of the

actor and director; and this creative package tends to follow the financing. This is hardly surprising, because distributors and financiers know that 'high profile' casting provides valuable and necessary marketing opportunities that ensure the box office success, on a par with considerations such as the genre of the film and directorial talent. Casting requirements then are directly related to the economic funding of a film, and creative risks in this area can be seen to operate on a sliding scale that is proportionate to the level of investment; ergo the smaller the budget more creative risks can be taken, if only because you cannot buy expensive talent cheaply. As a comparison, the budget for *Secrets and Lies* (1996) ran to approximately 2.5 million pounds (source: IMDBPro), while *Tina Goes Shopping* was produced for a 10th of the price, which Penny Woolcock euphemistically termed as being 'a documentary budget' (Howe, 2004).

Given creative autonomy from the marketing aspirations of a distributor, it is possible for a director to identify any number of actors capable of doing justice to a given role. Of course, outside the economic and marketing pressures, it is also possible to appreciate how the complex cocktail of personality and directorial judgement can also skew the decision making process. In *Directing Actors: Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (1996), author Judith Weston highlights a potential casting trap for the director 'Most directors look for the performance that they have been running in the moviola-of-their-mind' (1996:235) and warns that this is a mistake because '*An audition is not a performance.*' (ibid, author's italics) Furthermore, Weston says that 'Directors often fall into a "dream lover" approach to casting. This means having an idea/ideal of the character in your head and searching for the actor who matches it.' (ibid) By contrast to this, and atypical of 'standard' institutional practices, Woolcock's approach to casting her 'Tina' films grew organically out

of the background research. She developed script materials and structures for both *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) and *Tina Takes a Break* (2001) following a period of active research on a number of housing estates. Although Woolcock had not cast the films at this stage, implicitly her formative research, a process in which she spent months talking to people and discovering their personal stories, could be seen as a 'quasi' casting session. In discussing this workflow, Woolcock revealed:

> I like to actually try and cast quite close to at least something that that person has. I wouldn't go and get any person off the street. I cast people who I know, and knowing whether or not somebody can do it, is just an instinct actually. I know people before hand and then I quite often write for them. So that, for example, in the 'Tina' films I spent months on those estates getting to know people and I cast people. In some cases they were actually very close in both occupation and character to the people they were playing. (Howe, 2004)

In casting both 'Tina' films, it would appear that executive producer, Grant McKee, gave Woolcock considerable latitude, thereby affording the opportunity of casting a number of unknown actors in principal roles. This was Woolcock's first television feature assignment and was commissioned following *Macbeth on the Estate* (1997). Although, Woolcock's version of 'the Scottish play' did use improvisation, clearly there was a framework of character and narrative in which to operate. Woolcock's first foray into improvised drama was a project that was devised and directed whilst employed as a youth worker. Following this performance and buoyed by the team's enthusiasm, the group then went on to devise and shoot an improvised video, titled *Not a Girl Anymore* (1986), which featured two young

women on an alcohol binge and was eventually broadcast as part of Channel Four's *Eleventh Hour* (1982-87) series.

I received about twenty actor's resumes for consideration. The auditions were held at The Actors Centre over the course of a day. My criterion was very simple, select the most personable and intelligent 'actors', people whom I wouldn't mind spending the afternoon in conversation with. I think it fair to say that both the actresses had very limited experience, mainly theatre at drama school. In discussing Leigh's process of selecting actors, Clements states:

> [Leigh] doesn't work with those actors who, for whatever reason, always play a version of themselves or who have become typecast, no matter how subtly, into always playing the same kind of personality. The qualities he values in good character actors are a sense of humour, a keen eye for the particular physical habits and mannerisms of people, a good ear for the specifics of accent and dialect and, of course, the necessary skills to transmute detailed observation into a sharply defined and singular character. (1986: 23)

At best, casting an improvised film represents a challenge, but in order to work on a Mike Leigh film, it would appear that there is a skill and mindset particular to Leigh's practice. A review of his auditioning process demonstrates that he is seeking above average skills, a level of technical and emotional virtuosity that is only to be found in the craft of an advanced performer; facets that can normally only be achieved through dedicated training and breadth of performance experience. When questioned about his 'method', in an early interview with

Peter Brunette, Leigh candidly stated that he felt audiences somehow perceived that his actors weren't acting at all. "These people aren't playing themselves, they're creating characterizations. I cast in a very empirical, instinctive way, partly because I work with people who are known to be highly versatile character actors." (Brunette 1991: 31) When starting out, Leigh found that casting initially proved problematic due to the number of actors that were sufficiently trained and willing to commit to the improvised working approach. Clements points out that in the early years, leading up to the stage version of *Bleak Moments*, 'Leigh would work with anyone who was willing to do a play with him' (1986: 22) That Leigh interpreted his actors as 'doing him a favour' is indeed interesting given the rigorous casting and research processes to which actors were subjected. He concedes that over time the situation seems to have improved and Leigh feels that there are more actors capable and willing to work in an exploratory way:

> A great many actors find it impossible to work like this: the ability to improvise intelligently is not the same as the old Rep actors' ability to ad lib in a crisis. The actor here has to think only of his own character: once he starts worrying about the overall framework of the play or if it'll work, then he's lost: it's only good for actors who want to play real people instead of stage characters…..what we're trying here is a form of social documentary. (Morley 1977: 4)

Whilst Woolcock was researching and casting for the 'Tina' films, she adopted an unorthodox strategy of hanging around pubs, community centres and the local shops, to undertake her primary research but also as a means of thinking about casting. Woolcock argues that because estates are "hermetically sealed worlds…..not on the way to anywhere" (Howe, 2004), you are unlikely to be trusted. People that don't live there are viewed as possibly

undercover cops, social workers or DHSS officials "you're always the kind of enemy in a way" (ibid.). In order to see off possible rumours, Woolcock's strategy was to turn up in public places and immediately tell people what she was doing:

> There are various things that I do either with, not professional actors and also with the professional ones or whatever you call them …where for me, the preparation is in getting to know people, so that I feel very comfortable with them, they do with me and that they trust me that I'm not going to make a fool of them so that if I'm wanting to hang them out to dry … which is kind of what I want to do… you know I want them to kind of peel off and go out there and be confident that I'm not going to make them look foolish you know and people will only really let themselves go if they feel that you're going to catch them.. you know.. because otherwise they'll protect themselves because they have to….So that for the Tina films I spent months hanging around on the estate and getting to know people and then I constructed the scripts. (Howe, 2004)

Finding Characters

Following the audition, I sent both Claire and Maggie an email containing **Suggested Approach to Creating Character (appendix p.190).** These notes were inspired by range of texts, specifically Mike Leigh's character development process, and the sheet provided a series of headings in order that the actors could produce notes and begin to think about their character's background, cultural influences and so forth. As I had no previous experience, my intention was to use any notes that the actors had compiled as a starting point. We would then

follow a similar development strategy to the one proposed by Mike Leigh, amalgamating character ideas, supplementing and borrowing attributes from people that they new.

Developing the character for a Mike Leigh film starts during the casting process and continues through the rehearsal period. On the first day of rehearsal Leigh asks his actors to find a character.

> Generally they come up with a list of five or six friends, people they would like to be, and during the first week or two of rehearsal I then work independently with each of the actors until he or she has selected one: these are not acting exercises in which people are supposed to be funny or inventive or amusing- they're a genuine search for characters who are then researched and built into a final script. Characters develop, then relationships, and these I monitor and follow and push towards a dramatic conflict of some kind, so that you get a microcosm of society through improvisation.
> (Morley, 1977: 3-4)

Leigh spends considerable time with his actors in developing and exploring the character through improvisation and other research techniques. Clements has identified two distinct phases in the rehearsal of a Mike Leigh film: 'pre-rehearsal and 'structuring'. Clements states that 'pre-rehearsal is essentially the equivalent of the writer's note-making stage' (1986: 33) and comprises of narrative and behaviour work. The second phase he terms as 'structuring'. This "is when the play is made up and rehearsed or when sequences of action are polished prior to their being filmed." (ibid). Leigh would argue that his characters develop organically – he then pushes them in a given direction whilst distilling his ideas based on the improvisation workshops into the 'shooting script'. Similarly, as previously articulated, Woolcock finds her cast during the initial field research and, in this way, the direction of

character development is being formed from an early stage. In common with Leigh, Woolcock's approach can equally be described as 'organic'.

One of the principal challenges for a filmmaker is to make the narrative 'cinematic'. Films that deal with the psychology of character where the motivations of character take place in their mind-sets, will naturally present a visual storytelling problem for the director. Simply put, the director must confront the inevitable question, how do I visually express and make 'external' the inner workings of character? Whilst it is important for the character to have, what Stanislavski would have termed, "inner motivation", it is equally important that film is driven on a kinetic level. 'The essence of character is action. Your character is what he does. Film is a visual medium, and the writer's responsibility is to choose an image, or picture, that cinematically dramatizes his character.' (Field 1984: 26) In developing characters for film, Syd Field draws the writer's attention to the correlation between 'the action' of character and the need to emphasize the visual qualities of the film medium. He asserts that the screenwriter should 'find ways to reveal your character's conflicts visually.' (ibid.: 23) Whilst Field's assertion seemingly gets to the nub of the matter, identifying and linking the visually 'cinematic' to the dramatization of character is likely to present a conundrum, if only because what is often regarded as being 'cinematic' is that which is held up as being kinetically visual. The source of drama within the films of Leigh and Woolcock tends to be located within the complex psychological choices and moments of realisation that a character must accommodate. Such situations do not usually lead to dramatic car chases or duels to the death. This is not to say that the conflict goes without notice or reaches a dramatic impasse, rather that the resulting drama which depicts the individual and family in crisis has a tendency towards scenes of emotional and psychological breakdown, or perhaps a surprise death as in

the case of *Abigail's Party* (1977); or, in the case of *Vera Drake* (2004), incarceration. The films of Leigh and Woolcock are small dramas, played out within the immediate and extended family, or 'closed' communities, as exemplified within the estate at the core of Woolcock's 'Tina' films. The filmmakers are drawn to narratives that deal with 'real' and down to earth subject matter, that which is known, accessible and located in the everyday. "In terms of narrative, setting and incident, the scale of Leigh's work is small" (Clements 1986: 59). Such is the reductive nature of his material, that some critics, including Leigh himself, have labelled the subject matter of his films as being rather "banal" (ibid). In her article 'Mike Leigh' author Judy Stone writes that:

> Leigh's goal is to put characters on the screen like real people: idiosyncratic, unique and individual and properly placed in their social context. Not to do characters like you get in many films. Bland. Real people are by definition interesting. I can sit in an airport or bus station for as long as I have to and don't get bored because my job is to put that on screen. It involves processes of detail and heightening and distillation. That is in the nature of caricature in the best sense. (2000: 27)

This is not to imply that these films lack a visual style. After all, the stark lighting and de-saturated visual treatments, coupled with the 'manicured' realism of the locations, neatly situate *Naked* (1993), *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) and *Hard Labour* (1973) within the 'social realist' genre; a branding with which many improvised films have inadvertently been associated. Woolcock's visual approach has certainly established precedence for an improvised style of filmmaking, more akin to Cassavetes, and this stems from the technical dictates of vérité and semi-documentary shooting practices. Later, I will return to comment in detail about the visualisation of improvised narratives, for now it will suffice to say that

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within the context of developing character, the mise-en-scène and visual treatment is an essential production decision that endeavours to support the mood of the film and reflect a character's emotional state.

Pre-Production Meetings

A preproduction meeting was held at the Actor's Centre during which the nature of the characters were discussed. It was agreed that Maggie Bradshaw would play the part of a photographic student who was engaged in producing images for an exhibition, and that Claire Barker would take the part of The Muse. Prior to the shoot, the actors were given two weeks to undertake some practical tasks. Maggie was provided with a 35mm stills camera[34] and an introductory book on photography[35] and was asked to investigate the skills required to become a photographer, specifically how to hold the camera and how to frame a shot. Claire was a given a copy of *The Satanic Bible* and invited to spend her time reading it so that she might identify the key features of LaVey's philosophy and belief system.

A week later, our next meeting was a wardrobe session in Camden Town. The cast headed off to Camden Market with a miniscule budget and the task of researching and purchasing a few small items of clothing and accessories that were appropriate to their characters. During the afternoon we headed back to the Actors Centre and had a workshop session in which Claire and Maggie told me as much as they could about their characters, identifying their backgrounds, interests, tastes in music, favourite films and plans for the

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[34] Pentax K100 and 50mm lens.

[35] Langford, M, (2000) *Basic Photography (7*th ed.), London: Focal Press.

future. Claire talked enthusiastically about the Church of Satan, what it stood for and what its members would do. I spent time showing Maggie how to use a camera and discussed what she might do for her photographic assignment. At this juncture our meetings would stop, as the next step would be to start filming.

The question of whether or not I should rehearse in the studio before committing to shooting on location reared its head. It was at this point that I decided not to engage in a formal rehearsal process. As already mentioned, the intention for this project was that this would be a 'happening', but more importantly I did not want the actors to feel that we were 'pretending'. The aim was to develop a set of real experiences as these actors were friends and needed a back-story. Therefore any attempt to work out scenes there were based on studio designed improvisations might be false. I was interested to see how the material unfolded and the direction that the characters would pursue. It is worth pausing to consider how rehearsal works in a conventional sense, so that the evaluation of this production decision may be more opaque.

Improvisation is much used within the rehearsal studio as a technique for supporting actors; helping to foster a greater understanding of their character and the dramatic contexts they are required to 'play out'. For reasons that will be further explored, the rehearsal process that is traditionally associated with theatre practice is anything but the norm within film production today. This notable absence of rehearsal is not the result of casual oversight, rather, it is rooted in 'cost effectiveness' and patterns of training that historically have come to define the film director's way of thinking. In training directors for film and television, considerable emphasis is placed on learning the craft skills of visual storytelling, in which experimenting with camera's movement and editing techniques are considered the primary

'tools of the trade'. Screenwriting classes situate the development of film scripts as a logical and structural process, commencing with the outline and expanding ideas about character and story through treatments and shooting scripts. In other words, it is taught that films are written and devised through a literary process. Under the circumstances, it is no wonder that the filmmaking process is treated as a technical rather than 'organic' development procedure, having little room to accommodate improvisation at structural and rehearsal stages. Whilst some directors have made the transition into television and film from both theatre and performance backgrounds (notably both Leigh and Woolcock) the majority of television directors have progressed through the ranks of floor managers, editors and scriptwriting. Others have moved into drama, having first 'cut their teeth' producing adverts, pop promos and documentaries. Whilst all points of entry into the director's chair are valid, very few film and television directors will have worked with actors, excepting those with experience that has been gained within the theatre. Given this scenario, the use of improvisation, devising and a formal rehearsal process will have little resonance with the production team; and in some cases, it may even induce slight anxiety at the prospect. It is no coincidence that practitioners who are often associated with improvised drama have roots within the theatre and practices of documentary production.

Many producers regard rehearsal in film production as an expensive, time consuming and a nonessential commodity. Rarely can productions afford to engage their cast on a full salary over the course of an extended rehearsal and filming period for the purposes of investigating character and story materials. It is worth noting that Leigh has been known to develop his film materials over a six-month duration. Although he does not work with principal actors every day, the understanding between director and cast is that they have to be

available and engaged in personal research and development of their character. For this purpose, Leigh needs the financial clout to be able to book his cast for half a year. Unlike Mike Leigh's development process, which is built around a form of rehearsal whereby characters undergo a series of 'investigations', Penny Woolcock has no rehearsal phase. In talking of her process on *Tina Goes Shopping*, she remarks:

> I don't like rehearsing. The preparation thing is just getting to know people and getting to feel very comfortable. In the case of the Tina films I didn't show anyone the script either, because I didn't want them to start thinking about how they were going to start performing as I thought they would begin acting in a way that I didn't want, or to start getting slightly kind of hammy or whatever. (2004)

When a period of rehearsal is scheduled for large Hollywood film projects, for example Francis Ford Coppola's version of *Dracula* (1992), the process can sometimes appear to emulate the practices associated with developing theatrical piece. As was demonstrated in the supporting documentary, *Blood Lines: Dracula - The Man. The Myth. The Movies*. (Werner 1992), Coppola started the rehearsal process with a cast read-through of the original book. This was largely a passive acting challenge, but James Hart then wrote a screenplay following this reading. The material was re-presented to the actors for feedback, together with the invitation that if they saw something that was in the book, but not the screenplay, they should come forward and a new version of the screenplay would be produced with the additional material (Werner 1992). In the rehearsal and development process there was an opportunity to block some of the key movement and learn skills including dancing, horse riding and hot air ballooning. Rehearsal allowed Coppola to explore a variety of ways in which a scene might be played, hoping to define the characters, intentions and meanings of the scenes.

Whilst directors will come to the rehearsal room with an understanding of how the story elements work, very few directors have fixed ideas about how the material will be played by the cast. Ideally, the director may want to use the rehearsal for investigating strategies for blocking the action. Similarly, the actor will want to discover their character and find motivation for the intended blocking. Therefore, the actor is not concerned with the fact that their character moves from position A to B, but more why the transition is made. The actor will expect the director to comment on the effectiveness of the performance and know that what is being offered meets the director's wishes and needs. However, rehearsal is not always valued by actors, when commenting on his work in Coppola's *Dracula*, Anthony Hopkins remarked 'Strangely I find too much rehearsal for a film is counterproductive, as it all seems to change when you get on set.' (Werner 1992).

In blocking the action, the director turns his attention to the choreography of an actor's movement within a set. This process tends to occupy much of the early business in a rehearsal strategy. Directors will be particularly concerned with problematic staging that requires the interaction of two or more actors. In film production, blocking tends to be left to the day of the shoot, as the director will often need to orchestrate the actor's movements in relation to the camera and its movement. Whilst the director may have specific ideas about the emotional and psychological impact of specific blocking, it requires all mise-en-scène elements to be in place.

If rehearsal for theatre and film production can be said to differ, it is because rehearsing a play is designed to lock down every aspect of the performance before the curtain rises, whereas the actor's performance for the film camera is further modified through the editing and post-production process; suggesting that the meanings and emotions generated

during the shoot will be tweaked and reinterpreted, according to the editing rhythms and application of sound and music.

Within the context of improvisation, the rehearsal process cannot be made to fit into a linear continuum of development. In other words, the sequential framework for developing a play does not readily fit the development of improvised character and narrative, in which the growth of one is clearly dependent on the growth of the other. The improvised narrative of *Tina Goes Shopping* does not rely on fixity. There are no set pieces to perform over and over again. In Leigh's 'model' for rehearsal there is a series of pre-existing character events that need to be remembered. Fictitious character events are required to be anchored within the character's experience. While improvising, there is no room for flights of fantasy, only an exploration of what is plausible and probable within a given time and space. Consequently, Leigh's improvisations take the actor on a journey that is controlled. Actors are not allowed to discuss material with each other outside the workshops, as this "collusion" would promote a sense of the familiar and undermine the freshness and uniqueness of the actor's investigations. As fragmentary as the improvisation process would appear to be to the outsider, the actor is engaged in a process of distillation and they are working to a single defining moment that concludes in a take. For this filmed moment to be honest, the intention must be an honest response.

Preparing to Film

Having completed the initial character research tasks, my next step was to situate the costumed actors within a location and 'let them loose'. On the day of the shoot my direction was from a distance. My instruction to the actors was that there was no obligation for the characters to tell a story or be funny. At this stage I was not concerned with attempting to structure the narrative around notional cause and effect patterns; rather I wanted to drop the viewer into the world of two characters, to see whether it would be possible to construct an aspect of their character's lives within the found world. Although, I appreciated that I might end up with rather banal and everyday dialogue exchanges, I was hopeful that this would be interesting if the characters were engaged in genuine and purposeful business. I was keen for the actors to be 'truthful' to their work and impressed upon them that the actions should be focused and decisive, rather than placing emphasis on what could be said for dramatic effect.

In taking this approach I was keen to explore the value of mise-en-scene in relation to supporting a character through improvisation. I wondered to what extent the location and costume could not only influence the improvised performance, but effectively become, or at least contribute to forming, the substance of the character. In taking the emphasis away from what was being said, I hoped to allow the juxtaposition of character actions, costume and mise-en-scene to 'steer' the narrative. This strategy opposes the conventional approach employed through script writing and development, wherein the story is as much telegraphed through dialogue and the implications of what is being said.

SCREEN FALLEN ANGELS

Fallen Angels: Production Considerations

A conscious decision was made to keep the camera running, not to stop and never to reshoot material. It was agreed that we would only do one take of the action at each location. Each scene would be unique and unrepeatable. The reason being that if we were to retake then the repetition would fall into pre-planned responses and patterns of behaviour, which would become mannered and lose the initial spark. My instruction to the actors was that they should keep going and not stop all the while that the camera was rolling. They were to ignore the camera at all times. The four scenes that make up the film are self-contained. Although the original footage is much longer than that which has been included in the edit, I felt that the additional footage showing walking between different locations in the cemetery and discussions between myself and the cast, were not particularly relevant to the narrative[36].

For practical reasons the camera was handheld. This was mainly because I didn't know when or where the actors would move within the frame and also because I didn't want to constrain the actors by anchoring them to a particular spot by setting up a specific and confined staging. In hindsight, radio microphones would have been useful, as a number of dialogue exchanges were missed because the roving shot gun microphone was not positioned close enough to the action in order to pick up sufficient detail, and at one point it is even visible in a shot. In reviewing the edited material, we might have the distinct sense that we are watching an observational documentary. This is because of the vérité aesthetic, which has not been applied for reasons of spoofing the form, rather, it was a way of accommodating freedom in the documentation of performance. I would argue that the viewer reads the material as being

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[36] The material is irrelevant in that it lengthened the scenes and did not provide further insight into the characters. I also used these 'off camera' periods to discuss where we might go and how we might further develop the character.

'authentic' because the production techniques are suggestive of the verisimilitude in relation to the documentary genre.

The fact that the actors were told to ignore the camera simplified the relationship between them and the camera. By 'denying' the camera's presence, which is contrary to the formalist device and acceptance of the camera, as exemplified in *The Blair Witch Project Project* (1999), I was able to close down any possible discourse between actors and the crew. This would avoid the implications that might arise out of why the crew were present and why the film did not seek to comment on the subject's behaviour or intervene at any point. As is the case with visual style in Lars von Trier's *Idioterne* (1998), the viewer is immediately situated as a voyeur, because of the anonymity created by the 'invisible' wall. The denial of the camera's presence enables the viewer to watch and enjoy the actor's behaviour with impunity. By contrast, in the Belgian mock-documentary *Man Bites Dog* (1992) the directors Belvaux, Bonzel and Poelvoorde created a narrative where the documentary team are drawn into filming the actions of a serial killer, which then justifies the crew's implicit and active participation in each crime. Acknowledgement of the crew also permits the highly subjective shooting style, filmed as though it were a video diary, in which the presence of the camera is never really questioned.

The pacing of *Fallen Angels* is largely controlled by the duration of each shot. I felt that the use of the 'long take'[37] was invaluable in keeping the momentum of the improvisation

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[37] I writing about The Long Take, Henderson (1971) distinguishes between a single shot that comprises of long duration as opposed to a long sequences, in which Goddard's *Weekend* is cited as offering a number of examples. Andre Bazin (1967) explored the aesthtic properties of the long take and David Menard (2003) writes that 'Bazin justified the use of the long take by the criterion of "bringing an added measure of realism to the screen … It is, in fact, his main criterion for judging the realism of shooting styles."

going and also maintaining the verisimilitude of the realist aesthetic. Breaking down these tableaux into scenes that comprised of individual shots would have served little purpose for this exercise, wherein the emphasis was being placed on that which could be achieved in a continuous manner. In effect, I wanted to see what the actors could create during the course of a free flowing, 'real life', exchange, rather than distilling their interchange through an edited montage. In fact, it would have been virtually impossible to bridge individually recorded shots together, without first having a sense of the direction that the scene might take. Although the material was not 'edited', other than the shots being topped and tailed, the pacing of the material is not static, plodding or measured as one might assume. Because the narrative journey takes place in each scene, we can note that the rhythm of the film is varied by the actors' physical actions and their own sense of timing. I consider this to be a benefit arising from the use of improvisation as it means that the speech patterns and ideas, or beats[38] as they are have been termed, are developed by the actor in a logical manner and will usually flow in a natural way. Undoubtedly, the film's editing and pacing of the material is also controlled when panning the camera between the actors; as the spectator searches for feedback and a reaction to what each of them is saying or doing. If I had used a second camera this movement could have been eradicated and the point of view or reaction shot could happen through the use of cutting. However, a straight cut from one shot to the next would remove the in-shot movement and energy created by the camera's motion and reaction

Evaluating the temporal effect of shot duration, in relation to editing theory and the development of film narrative, has been explored by a number of academics. The Cinemetrics software is useful in that it counts the numbers of shots and measures the shot duration in film. http://www.cinemetrics.lv/

[38] Judith Weston, author of *Directing Actors: Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (1996) refers to 'a beat' as being a unit of action containing a specific idea. She says 'The term "beat" is widely misunderstood to mean changes in mood, or pause, or something to do with the pace or tempo-rhythm of the scene.' (Weston 1996:219) '...the "beats" are the bits, the little sections of a scene. Stanislavski called them "units". The simplest, best way to identify them is by *subject*-when the subject changes, that is a new beat.' (ibid.)

to the characters. This would speed the pace of the film up and make the camera less obvious, as can be seen in the studio exercise entitled *The Graduate Workshop* (2010), which will be evaluated a little later. We can see that the presence of the camera and shooting style also contributes to the energy of a performance. It is an organic energy that cannot be pre-planned as the camera itself is improvising with the cast.

The Actor

In hindsight I have speculated whether the material would have been more authentic, had I cast non-actors from the goth scene. Would the characters have had more 'depth' and been able take the material in new directions having a closer natural affinity with the Goth culture? This is not a criticism of the actor's skills in relation to the work, rather that the process needs considerable input on the part of the actor. They must continually research and find ways to think about their character. In other words, the non-actor can just be, because they can draw from personal experience, whereas these actors had to create and invent character. Following this thought through, would the non-actor be able to offer a substantially different performance?

To what extent does costume and setting have significant part in defining the character, beyond the content of what is being said? In spite of the clothing, and based on my knowledge of Claire and Maggie during our preproduction meetings, the representations and playfulness these women offered for the screen seemed very close to what I knew of their initial work in the studio. Although I knew that the actors had begun to develop an identity based around the preparatory homework, it is pertinent to ask, where does this preparation

locate the 'non-actor' on the acting-not acting scale? In Michael Kirby's continuum, these actors would be located within the "symbolized matrix" portion of the continuum, a 'condition in which the performer does not act and yet his or her costume represents something or someone.' (2002: 41). If the actor's outward personas have not altered, to what extent was the character taking shape within? At what point does the actor's personal experience end, and the 'imagined' character take over? As Mike Leigh posits, 'Most acting, most of the time, isn't motivated by anything other than the *actor's* motivation. There isn't any *character* motivation.' (Clements, 1986: 25). Although, I could not yet see the final shape and extent of the characterisation, I felt certain that with further work and preparatory tasks, a strong character foundation could be developed. Perhaps the production medium supports the actor's skills by giving confidence in their abilities to reconstruct the world around them. Character can be built piece by piece and the actors soon learn that they can add material as they go, with the knowledge that the camera can be paused and material can be edited and re-ordered. That the actors could behave in this gregarious way and not be worried or 'thrown' by the presence of the camera does evidence that they were highly capable of maintaining their screen pretence. At no point did either actor seek out the lens or catch its gaze, and they were genuinely immersed in the business at hand. This initial experiment had proved invaluable in demonstrating the importance of costume, setting and action in constructing character. The lightness of tone and movement around the cemetery uphold the notion that character has to be able to establish a physical presence that goes beyond the content of dialogue.

Fallen Angels revealed a number of key issues about improvisation technique that I felt would benefit from further in depth exploration in my next film. In the first instance, this

production demonstrated the importance of allowing the actors time to explore the space and react to what can be found within the location. The context of the film invited the actors to explore the cemetery space and think specifically about their representation, while going through the process of making images in the space (even though there was no film in the still camera to complete this cycle). Clearly, in other improvisation contexts such interaction may not be required or possible. However, I think there is a sense that when we find ourselves within a space, unless we are comfortable with the environment because it is known to us, we naturally find ourselves monitoring and evaluating the space for changes. Whilst this may be an automatic reflex, the fact is that we constantly relate and adjust ourselves to the environments that we occupy, both the spaces and people in our company. The most noticeable example of this is when we enter, move about or leave a space. However, the monitoring of our environment is a constant background process and could certainly, if done well, be used to shade a performance. Whilst I do not wish to generalise, this type of behavioural detail is not something that we often see within a performance. More typically the actor walks into a space with a sense of premeditated purpose, knowing that they must pick up x or y object or cross the room and have a conversation with the person at the table. It is easy to see that this premeditation of action will often override and compromise the spontaneity of action within performance. The knowledge that an actor must go to x or y and hit a given mark at a given moment can lead to a series of automated moves, where the muscles are in a state of tension and readiness to jump to a given cue.

I felt that in *Fallen Angels* the exploration of the space was driven by a natural curiosity, with a sense of never knowing quite what could be found around the next corner. Through repeated exploration of The Muse in relation to the landscape and the iconography of

the cemetery, the confidence of Claire's improvisation grew. At each location Claire's performances seemed to get bigger and bolder, starting with the tame notion of taking a photograph on a tombstone and culminating with her swinging from a tree with a broken cross. Whether this was the result of being in costume, a disguise that permits this type of behaviour and releases inhibition, or whether the result of being encouraged by Maggie and clowning around for the camera, I cannot be certain. However, by the end of the three-hour shoot, it felt like the cast and crew had been on a journey that had fundamentally revealed something of both characters' personalities.

Defining the characters' costume, hair and make-up seemed equally to be another important springboard and the actors willingly engaged in some individual research to find an appropriate dress code to shape their characters' identity. Listening to music and identifying other cultural influences became equally important. Unfortunately though, there was not the opportunity to incorporate this newfound knowledge within the day's shoot. However, between takes Claire would enthusiastically discuss some of Anton LaVey's rhetoric and in hindsight it would have been good to sit Claire on a tombstone and have her character discuss the merits or otherwise of *The Satanic Bible*. This would have clearly moved the material further into the documentary arena and would have provided a little more depth to counter the onscreen clowning. Whilst I had no sense that Claire had become unduly influenced by the material, and was 'straying' down the path of becoming a Satanist, she did appear to have acquired a strong and keen understanding of the principal philosophy underpinning Satanism and its practices. Likewise, in talking to Maggie about her new found ambitions in 'photography' I equally sensed that she had grasped some of the key principles and we had a number of conversations about composition and using handheld light meters. Again, it would

have been useful to see Maggie's experiential learning extended by arranging to go to a photographic exhibition or have her sit at a computer and manipulate the photos she was taking of Claire, or capture the excitement of seeing one of the exhibition photographs having been printed up collected from a framers.

In questioning the value of these research tasks, albeit based on the limited experience that I had with this development approach, I feel that as long as these are well chosen and focused towards supporting the actor's logical development, then I see no reason to doubt the value of this method. The task must ideally be synonymous with what could reasonably be expected from a character in a given situation. Of course there is nothing unusual in this approach as Stanislavski advocates in *Building a Character* (2000):

> Each person evolves an external characterisation out of himself, from others, takes it from real or imaginary life, according to his intuition, his observation of himself and others. He draws it from his own experiences of life or that of his friends, from pictures, engravings, drawings, books, stories, novels, or from some simple incident - it makes no difference. (2000: 9-10)

In looking at the situation from an institutional standpoint, when writing a screenplay, the director or writer may equally choose to engage in the formative research behind a role and attempt to convey the characters' practices within a script. It would be very hard to construct a detailed narrative around the working life of a plumber without having some prior knowledge of what kind of work plumbers do and how they spend their time in the course of a day or week. When the actor picks up the script, according to the quality of the written description, the action and subtleties of a character's lifestyle may or may not have been successfully conveyed on the page. For the actor, the quality of this information is important,

as the detail is often missing or paraphrased on the page. Unless the actor can engage in physical research, as has been highlighted, then it is unlikely that the actor will be able to offer a convincing and spontaneous portrayal of a given occupation. We do not become plumbers simply by holding a tool bag, or being a photographer by holding a camera; how you walk and think in occupational terms colours the characterisation.

Accordingly, within the improvisation work that I wanted to develop it became apparent that there was no substitute for an actor engaging in personal practical research tasks in order to develop a closer affinity with their character and provide a well of 'lived' experience from which they could draw. However, this process requires that the actor is willing to take on this journey of self-learning and discovery and, to an extent this is where my favoured approach came to an end. Budget for pre-rehearsal is the deciding factor in a process that has a lengthy gestation period. Clearly, Mike Leigh is able to extend the improvisation work in his pre-rehearsal phase much further in the development of his films, and at one point was budgeting for an eight-week pre-rehearsal period prior to the shoot (Clements 1986:52). His actors are contracted and being paid for their research and workshop days. As I discovered, my volunteer cast and crew were not able to offer such commitment. In commenting on the value of the actor's research in relation to Leigh's early work, Clements has written that 'Research contributes vitally to the actor's belief in the reality of the character he plays and provides him with material which will inform his action in figurative improvisations.' (ibid: 43)

Directing the Improvisation

In reviewing the footage and examining my process I began to question 'who' actually controlled these improvisations? At the point of filming I was aware that the actors would lead the action and the camera would follow. As a director I felt 'helpless', as from the moment the camera was turned on, the documentation team really had to become invisible journeymen. This is not surprising, as it is the same negotiation that the documentary filmmaker has to engage with when observing his subjects. In thinking about the dynamics of the performance, I was keen to examine which actor took the lead in the scene, and to try to formulate an understanding of why this happened.

The Muse comes across as being a clown and seems to lead the scene. She clearly enjoys being the subject of the Photographer's gaze and also draws our attention. By contrast, the Photographer is more earnest and 'servile' and her lead tends to be secondary to those of the Muse: reminding me of Johnson's notion of character status in relation to the Master-Servant role play games, wherein, the Muse seems to have subtly occupied the position of being 'the master' controlling both the Photographer's and the audience's gaze and leading us towards points of interest. I must clarify that the actors were not invited to take the positions of either master or servant and therefore this situation evidences the natural materialisation of the roles, being negotiated as the improvisation developed. In many ways it would have been more logical for the Photographer to take control of each scene, particularly as the given purpose of this situation was for the photographer to be making images for an exhibition; a situation that seems to demand decisive action and control on the part of the image maker.

In thinking about the improvisation's ability to reveal narrative, my principal concern with this experiment was that we didn't learn why the photographs were being taken and we didn't know how the characters felt about being in this location and the situation of being photographed. Although spontaneous, the characters' attitudes, conveyed by relaxed body language, seemed to indicate acceptance of the situation. The characters behaved as if they had done this before and I was aware that tension did not exist within the scenes. Furthermore, that if this dramatic situation was to be worked up and presented within a more substantial film, then additional improvisation stimuli and 'direction' would possibly need to be introduced, to provide conflict. However, I concede that the function of *Fallen Angels*, within the context of a bigger narrative, might be to provide a glimpse of 'the normal', banal 'status quo' in the lives of these characters. Perhaps dramatic tension could exist in other scenes that had not yet been revealed.

In documentary production we look for drama in everyday situations, whereas in fiction we create it. Of course, drama can exist in a setting, and a person's behaviour within a setting can invite criticism and unease. There were moments in the filming when I questioned how and whether I should intervene? Should I stop the performances that were unfolding, as some might regard the actions of the girls as being disrespectful.

In thinking about developing narrative techniques for the next film exercise, I considered that perhaps a strategy for kick starting and directing an improvisation might be worth implementing in the next project. When watching improvisation-based sketch shows, the audience has an expectation that the structure of a scene will build towards a comedic pay off. But what of dramatic improvisation that is not rooted in comedy? Two questions that kept nagging me were 'How do you open and close an improvised scene?' and 'Is it important

to wrap up a scene and provide a punch line or resolution?'. Conventional wisdom in the area of screen writing suggests that we need to know something by the end of the scene that we did not know at the start. This would suggest that we need to start the material with an active question. Rather than encourage the actors to conceive of answering the question through dialogue I wondered whether they could turn to their physical and emotional needs rather than attempting to intellectualise the situation and outcome. Perhaps they could ask themselves 'what is my mood and what does my character want at this given point'. Are they tired, hungry or unwell?

Blood Offering: The Journey Continues

The relationship between character, causality and narrative structure is a balance that director and actor negotiate through improvisation, as well as traditional scripting processes. It was this concern that influenced my improvisational practices in the production of *Blood Offering* (2005) encouraging me to think about how one could expand on the 'happening' style approach that was taken in *Fallen Angels*. In echoing some of the production practices of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), by this I am referring to 'remote control' directing strategies employed by Myrick and Sanchez (www.woodsmovie.com), *Blood Offering* deliberately set out to be a cinematic 'happening' and in this respect extended the methods that I had previously used. In essence, the approach was to bring together a group of actors and invite them to produce improvised responses to a series of given situations. The situations themselves were not fabricated, in other words the actors really were setting out to produce a ritual, navigate their way to locations and pick up a hitchhiker. Unlike the remote directing of *Blair Witch*, this director would be present as a cameraman, but there would be no directing of actors. Furthermore, there would be no discussions between the director and actor about character motivation and the events that have led up to the present filmed situation. The choices about character would be the actor's choices alone and it was for them to decide what was right for their character at a given moment.

Blood Offering* continued the improvisation practices that I had been established in *Fallen Angels*, whereby I had encouraged the actors to take their inspiration from the mise-en-scene and play with the thoughts and feelings occurring at that given moment. As in *Fallen Angels*, the aim for *Blood Offering* was to provide a performance context, however the process was to be extended by bringing together a number of scenes to develop a long form

improvisation. I decided to go further and introduce a goal for each scene and this would assist in contributing towards a larger narrative journey. In *Fallen Angels* I observed that the decision to avoid a tight structure permitted the actors to take their lead from the cues that are offered in the moment, whether through comments made by an acting partner or through interaction with the environment. As was seen in the analysis of *Fallen Angels*, this approach produced raw, unrefined but at the same time 'natural' performances. These performances often flowed and, when developed in an appropriately paced manner, they did not seem overtly contrived. The interpersonal communication that is evidenced between Claire and Maggie has 'honest' qualities, probably, because the characterisation was kept to a minimum and was not forced.

The interplay between improvising narrative and character appeared to work well for my first experiment. I surmise, because there was no requirement or intention to reach a predetermined narrative goal. In effect we were just dropping in on a situation/conversation that was unfolding. By contrast, in mainstream drama, narrative is driven by decisive character actions that are informed by equally decisive character motivations. These motivations tend to be overtly transparent, and have been telegraphed to an audience, be it to: overcome a problem with another character, get some money or win the love of another. The goals and pacing of the material typically need to be immediate, in order to force the drama out of a situation in a short period of time. In *Fallen Angels* such dramatic imperatives were not required from the actors, so in that respect the material that was being improvised was not forced. In *Blood Offering* I had decided to introduce notional scenes, and to instigate the requirement that each scene would advance the story in a particular direction, whatever that might be on the day. Inevitably, this would require the actors to be more focused and driven; a

process that I appreciated may ultimately compromise the material. Nevertheless, I believed this was a valid process, taking impetus from the findings in *Fallen Angels,* and it introduced a new angle and challenge for my improvisation practice.

Development of Blood Offering

I was drawn to exploring narrative territories that might interest younger audiences, specifically in the 18-25 year demographic. In terms of the subject matter, I was keen to examine the links between exploitation films and the classic morality play, using the documentary form to add a gritty aesthetic and lend 'truth' and 'credibility' to the material. The genre of the film was predicated on the format of a 'road movie'. This would be both a physical and spiritual journey and would be kick-started, early in the narrative, by the action of a Satanic Baptism. I saw the material as a continuity of the character's relationships and interests that had been established in *Fallen Angels*. Although I had some specific ideas for the subject matter of the project, specifically thinking about ritual and faith, I wondered what directorial processes would be necessary to introduce these ideas, to help focus and shape the material, without stifling the experimental process and discovery through the improvised experience.

In putting together the cast for *Blood Offering* the intention had been to continue with Clair and Maggie, as the key characters. Unfortunately, the scheduling of the film in the summer conflicted with the actors' availability and by this time both actresses were committed to other productions and their paid employment. Naturally, this was very disappointing and the benefits of the material from *Fallen Angels* and actors own discoveries about their character

had to be consigned to the cutting room floor. I proceeded to cast, as before, using a variety of online casting solutions, which included: castingcallpro.com, castnet.co.uk and starnow.co.uk

It seemed appropriate that the cast should take individual responsibility for the creation of their own characters. Such responsibility necessitated that the cast engage in a range of preparatory processes, thinking about self-image, fashion, cultural influences, musical tastes. Cast members were invited to develop for themselves a character biography, in which they would pen ideas about their family, upbringing, schooling, the places where they lived and played, relationships, high and low points in their experiences (see appendix – creating character p.190). On reflection, this seemed an onerous task, but it epitomized a practical approach to thinking about a 'character' all of which would be necessary if taking on a scripted drama.

Prior to the shoot, the cast were provided with a copy of *The Satanic Bible* (LaVey, 1969), as a means of stimulating ideas about the intentions of the friendship group and its activities. Due to the time constraints of a three-day schedule, I was unable to engage in the earlier approach of 'work-shopping' a character prior to the shoot. Instead, the intention was that the characters would be formed out of 'found' actions interactions and motivations, through placing emphasis on the character's choices in the improvised situation. Unfortunately, in choosing to bypass the workshop stages, in which characters could be 'hot seated'[39] and challenged, there was no way of evaluating how much this background preparation had informed the characters. I trusted the cast to be faithful to the aims of the

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[39] Hot seating is a process in which the actor is quizzed about aspects of their character. Mike Leigh uses a similar process in casting where, following the initial audition which comprises of an interview and work out (Clements 1986: 23). Actors are invited to attend the first rehearsal, having prepared a list of characters and these are then discussed in detail (ibid: 24). Later in rehearsal, Leigh uses a more intense workout which is termed the Quiz Club (ibid: 43)

project, and assumed that they would not leave themselves unprepared for their role. It should be remembered that whilst I had the suggestion of a framework for the film[40], it was understood by the cast that the production was free to take its own narrative course and the actors were permitted to take their characters in any chosen direction. Of most significance, from the outset, I believed that by releasing the actors from an obligation to conform to a series of narrative benchmarks, any resident character potential could be explored in a meaningful and unencumbered way.

SCREEN BLOOD OFFERING

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[40] The framework for *Blood Offering* consisted of a step-outline, which can be found in the appendix (p.202). The purpose of this outline was to think about a possible narrative structure, in the event that the cast floundered and might need a clear directorial steer in the shoot.

Analysing Blood Offering: Planning the Journey

Blood Offering uses the simple structure of a journey to a specific location to arrange a set of ideas. The provisional structure (see below for plot outline) was based on ideas and strategies borrowed from *The Blair Witch Project (1999),* specifically the notion of a camping expedition that goes wrong. As previously mentioned, *Blair Witch* combined the suspense/horror genre with a low budget video aesthetic to considerable effect. This combination certainly appealed to the youth market and offered an alternative to the slick looking images of horror/thriller films such as *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Se7en* (1995*), The Ring* (1998). A rather less known fact was that *Blair Witch* was improvised, using a technique where the director would leave instructions/directions for specific cast members at their campsites. I have included an example of the directors' instructions to Joshua, Heather and Mike (p.228), which demonstrates the emphasis and specific character goals that needed to be achieved for the scene ahead. There was a structure and outline for the film (pp.230-232) but the dialogue and interactions were improvised. At its simplest, *Blair Witch* is a story about being lost. The premise revolves around a group of young documentary filmmakers taking a trek into the woods with a poorly defined map and one by one coming to a grisly end. The success of the narrative lies in not showing what happens to the victims when they meet their 'grizzly' end. The film concentrates on showing the effects of fear on each of the victims and the tension builds as one by one members of the group are 'picked off'.

Proposed Story Outline.

Three women, Lilith, Mina and Morgana set off for the weekend to carry out a Satanic Baptism. They get lost but eventually turn up to a disused church and conduct the ritual. On the way back the group are joined by the arrival of a hitchhiker called Frank. Unfortunately, whilst looking for petrol, the team get lost and the camper van grinds to a halt. Lilith and Frank are nominated to go off and find fuel. While walking to the nearby village to find a garage, Frank produces a bottle of Vodka. After a while and multiple shots the couple become drunk and the scene culminates in them having sex in a disused shed. In their post-coital discussion Lilith persuades Frank to indulge her blood lust, and she accidentally cuts into one of Franks arteries. Lilith runs back to the van to find help, but when they return to the hut it becomes apparent that Frank is very near to death. What are they to do? Morgana tries to convince them to abandon Frank and an argument ensues.

Acting and Improvisation in Blood Offering

Blood Offering features the work of actors and non-actors and I will evaluate how filmmaking practice can accommodate a variety of actor's skills and performances within the same frame. A key consideration for both my film projects was to develop an understanding of how to use improvisation to get to the core of a character and also to evaluate whether the actor's involvement, being responsible for devising and implementing their character, offered a distinct sense of ownership over the material when compared to working with a 'scripted' construct. There is an obvious paradox in this view: for any performance to be effective, the

actor needs to take ownership of the material and immerse himself within the role. Michael Caine, articulates this actor's responsibility to the character and self in the following extract

> The ordinary man in the street doesn't get up in the morning and say to himself, "How shall I act to today? What impression shall I give?" He just lives his life, goes about his business thinking his thoughts. A film actor must be sufficiently in charge of his material and in tune with the life of his character to think his character's most private thoughts as though no one were watching him- no camera spying on him. The camera just happens to be there... A film actor must be able to dream another person's dreams before he can call that character his own. [Caine, 1997:3]

The screen actor has to believe the situations that they are working in, and responses have to be 'honest' and from the heart. Whether or not the actor's performance can be interpreted as being heartfelt is a consideration that has been pursued through analysis of my work. At the very least it should be noted that audience perception is largely dependent on how the actor's emotion is conveyed through 'body language' and how this codification of emotion is supported by through other filmic elements, including camerawork, mise-en-scene and editing.

As previously articulated, the improvised performance seems to exhibit traces of authenticity and 'truth', which emanates from the logic of character interaction. Of course the notion of 'truth' in cinema and performance is a highly contested debate, given that the trust of the debate centres on whether the actor/subject is being less truthful when documented by the camera. Although, the very act of being filmed is a process of construction, not present in actuality, we might argue that the presence of another person and the act of being watched subverts our behaviour anyway. Authentic on-camera reactions tend to be present when actors

are prepared to reveal themselves. That is to say, they are not worried about being observed. Arguably, it has little to do 'per se' with the actuality of the camera. Conceivably, the advantage of a long-form improvisation, where there is minimal, ideally, no crew, is that it is possible to become more invisible and the actor knows they are only playing to a few people, as opposed to being situated in the midst of a large team.

The difference between the performances of the actor and non-actor is, initially, a matter of working in the presence of a camera. How do they mentally characterise the camera, as friend or foe? By contrast, the actor inherently understands that their 'function' is to be observed through performance and their training works to provide supporting strategies for handling this level of observation.

The non-actors of *Blood Offering* had no formal film actor training. Although Morgana and Mina had been to drama school, by contrast Lilith had not. Yet as the shoot developed it was clear that Lilith as a character was becoming stronger and taking more risks. It might be pertinent to briefly revisit Kirby's acting-not acting continuum, so that analysis of the performance can be set within a context.

In general, we can say that the non-actor, or non-professional actor, hasn't studied the craft and associated disciplines of acting, including learning lines, classes in movement, relaxing and breathing techniques, classes to promote and stimulate memory and emotion recall, singing and vocal projection work. Yet despite this lack of training and 'discipline', the non-actor can still be an effective film actor. Seemingly, an improvised 'performance' can be defined and supported by the filmmaking process. The technology and the possibility of reshooting and editing can mask the inept performance, as a performance could be made up of a number of takes whereby a series of performance events have been stitched together.

Yet, the non-actor can still be regarded as 'acting' on film. Like their trained counterpart, they must pretend that the camera is not present and that they are doing things for the first time, even when the blocking of action has been rehearsed a number of times. One of the principal problems in relation to the 'acting' versus 'not acting' debate (Kirby, 2002: 40) is whether the non-actor is in fact 'projecting' a form of characterisation that can be regarded as acting. Of course, audiences have no frame of reference to distinguish whether, or not, the non-actor is being 'themselves' in the presence of a camera. What does it mean to 'be yourself' on camera? At best, the director can only determine whether the performed actions and emotions are 'believable' in the given circumstances of the scene.

Blood Offering can be best described as a filmed workshop comprising of a series of scenic 'studies' that has been photographed on location. At the beginning of the project development process I was unsure whether this experiment would yield a completed journey, given that the schedule was limited to three working days. As was the case in *Fallen Angels*, although the resulting film has a narrative, it has not followed a structure that has been planned and rehearsed over many months; all action happens in the moment that it does. Consequently, the material needed to anchor the characters in their world, to set the scene, and fill in the narrative development. Story events that might typically be required in setting up the story were absent. Of course with more production time and a clearer sense of purpose these missing scenes could be factored in.

Blood Offering is an experiment with improvisation. It goes back to basics and attempts to learn about the connections between improvisation and filmmaking from the grass roots up. I wanted a first hand experience and understanding of the challenges that face the filmmaker when using improvisation in the production of a film; to use improvisation to

develop narrative and character, and to see what happens to these elements within a filmmaking context. What constraints does the camera have on the improvised performance process?

What the audience is seeing can best be described as a happening, a filmed event in which the cast are responding to the environment and simple set of tasks. For reasons that will be explained, there is no in-depth characterisation. The action has not been constrained by the existence of a deep structure. In fact, from the beginning of the process there was very little discussion about the narrative development of the material, other than attempts to explore the requirements of immediate action and staging. Essentially, the actors were provided with a situation and encouraged to find their own motivation within the scene and to follow any lead or 'offer' that was put forward by other members of the cast.

Naturally, I was aware and a little concerned that due to the lack of preparation there would be the inherent problem of poorly formed characterisation. In this regard and to alleviate concerns for the cast, I had proposed that this project would be no more than the sketch for an idea, a starting point. I explicitly gave them permission to try and not to worry about the consequences. In other words, the actors had permission to fail.

Improvised characters may be founded on 'real people', which are then embellished: a process of development that will be familiar to actors working with Mike Leigh. From a practical standpoint, finding a balance between revealing the 'interior' and 'exterior' worlds of a character's life is an area of process that needs deeper understanding, and it was a factor that I was undecided about when shooting *Blood Offering*. In reality, not enough time was given over to working through the 'interior' aspects of character with the actors. I permitted the cast to invent their own character and never challenged this invention during the shoot.

With hindsight it could be argued that, filming other scenes, maybe replicating the cemetery material in *Fallen Angels* or with Lilith going about her normal life, would have been useful in fully exploring the back-story of the character. This could then have enabled more material to be developed on the location, particularly between Mina and Lilith. I feel Mina was rather unused and had more to offer.

In the three days that the *Blood Offering* team had together, my ambition was to explore Field's notion of character 'action'. I wanted to see how cause and effect could be created 'in the field', rather than invent these materials in a workshop or through writing. Of course, I now realise that to an extent the director is at the mercy of the actor's inventiveness and ownership of the character. However, within the terms and goals for improvisational activity, once again the improvisation process delivered some useful materials on which a further narrative could be developed. In these terms alone the project was for me a success.

In reviewing *Blood Offering*, I feel that I did not succeed in creating a narrative in which the spectator could begin to care about character. We needed to see more of Lilith's backstory. We needed to like her. The challenge for the filmmaker is to create a narrative, which the audience can 'buy into', and, at the very least, align themselves with and find empathy with a character's plight. As screenwriting author, William Miller says: "The audience wants to care about the characters. We become intimately involved with them through the psychological processes of empathy and identification... We see ourselves in their struggles, triumphs and failures.' (Miller 1988: 82)

As a narrative, one of the reasons that *Blood Offering* failed to achieve this empathy is partly because the characters' concerns and goals had not been adequately established at the beginning of the film. We do not know why Lilith wants to be baptised. What is drawing her

to this cult? We do not see her relationships with family and friends being played out.

Equally, the spectator does not know what the consequences of her actions might be, or even

why there has been 'a blood offering'. Is this a satanic ritual being fulfilled or an accident?

4.2 LEARNING TO FLY

Context for *Birdman*

The short film *Birdman* was based on David Almond's short story *My Dad's A Birdman* [2007][41]. This film project presented a departure from the precepts that were adopted for *Blood Offering*. Whereas the intention in my earlier work was to create a cinematic 'happening', wherein the actors were permitted to determine the narrative of the film, the principle underlying the production of *Birdman* was to produce a more defined film, which would enable me to examine the interplay between improvised performance and scripted narrative. I was interested in trying to make a film where I did not have to worry about whether the narrative would make sense, and I could spend more time studying the effects of improvisation within the performance. This planned journey would employ classical film production practices, which where intended to imbue the project with high-end production values, a stark contrast to the 'rough and ready' approach taken with *Blood Offering*. I intended that *Birdman* would not carry the aesthetic formalism of a vérité style of filmmaking, a stylistic trait associated with a freer and less constrained style of filmmaking, rather, I would include tracking, travelling and crane shots, that would precisely control the spectator's gaze. In order to remove the production even further from an everyday 'reality' I took the post-modern approach of using costume and location dressing that suggested a modified 1950s aesthetic. Where possible locations were selected for the bright visible

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[41] I was introduced to *My Dad's A Birdman* [2007] through my daughter, during the months that followed *Blood Offering*. I began to question my development process with improvised material, thinking about what film projects would further challenge the process and in a less eclectic manner. I was also interested in attempting work that would have a more designed and mainstream aesthetic, instead of the 'realist' aesthetic that dominated the earlier films. I started looking for subject matter that could be suitable for a broad family audience, within the 8-12 age range.

structures, e.g. the red tower at the end of the pier, the blue and white painted buildings of the Crow's family home. I hoped that the use of these production techniques, together with a striking and colourful mise-en-scene would visually enrich the storytelling, making it more child-centred and bestowing a magical realism. Clearly, this was to be a delicate balancing act that brought together two, potentially opposing, production considerations. On the one hand, I was proposing to use improvisation to create 'naturalistic' and spontaneous performances, whilst on the other, by using sophisticated filming apparatus, I was going to smooth out 'reality' and give it a glossy veneer. This approach was then rather different from the observational shooting style of *Blood Offering*. Essentially, the realism I was seeking would be vested solely within performance and the purpose of the script was a basis on which to provide a suggestion of material, thereby giving actor's permission to completely adlib their lines or not. As in my other experiments, there would be no pre-rehearsal, all material would be blocked and shot on location.

The casting for Birdman involved a three-day workshop in which children were invited along and improvised scenes from the book on the day. I was privileged to see many gifted children and the casting sessions were great fun. I have included the improvisation session on the DVD, which reveals the improvisation process and evidences the talents of both Holly and Martin.

SCREEN: BIRDMAN IMPROVISATION WORKSHOP

The choice to use improvisation for this experiment was as a way of freeing up the performance, given that a very young actress would be required to play the part of Lizzie Crow. Having been previously exposed to using improvisation with children[42], I surmised that working with a script 'in the background', would assist the young actress by displacing the pressure to invent materials on the spot.

The Audition DVD shows how willing Holly was in engaging with Martin in the improvisation process. It showed how she was prepared to follow and respond to the 'game' and situation that was being developed. I was keenly aware of the wide-eyed and open body language and sense of fun that was being conveyed both verbally and non-verbally. I felt certain that if I could capture this on film, we would be very lucky.

On set, my rhetoric would be to emphasise the freedom of being able to play with the character and not to become locked into delivering lines. There was going to be no prior rehearsal, we would just turn up and loosely block the action and then shoot. I wondered whether the absence of rehearsals would be more unsettling for the more experienced performers. Generally, the professional actor expects their work to be grounded and informed

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[42] I had developed some experience of working with children through my involvement with the Canterbury-based children's group Kent Youth Theatre [KYT] from 2007-08. During these weekly workshops and summer schools, I realised that it was possible to obtain some very convincing performances from young children using improvised situations. Most of the filmed work I undertook with the children developed from improvised situations. It would be an exaggeration to claim that this approach always worked, as there were many unsuccessful improvised experiments that suggested a tighter narrative structure and clearer direction for the characterisation would have produced more effective performances. However, in the main, it seemed that many of these children were capable of delivering accomplished improvised performances, acting 'in the moment' and being spontaneous. The children regularly proved willing to suspend concepts of 'who' they were, and to readily play around with a set of narrative situations and character types. Through my work with KYT, I had observed that many of the children tended to operate in the moment and were not typically able to pre-empt the direction of a dramatic situation, a quality that I felt could hinder long-form improvisation. Equally, the children did not appear to project their 'personal anxieties' into anticipated acting situations, which kept the material light and rather shallow, as they could not or would not draw from personal emotional experience. Although I have not been able to fully explore this area in detail, my experience has led me to believe that children's actions and reactions within drama are seemingly informed by the stimuli of the moment, working in the 'here and now' from the more primal needs of the id, rather than driven by the super-ego.

by an independent 'research' process and a question and answer session with the director. These conversations are useful in informing the possible direction that an actor might take with the part, exploring the parameters and expectations of what the director is looking for in the performance. In commenting on the nature of an actor's preparation and how this relates to giving a spontaneous performance, Michael Caine offers the following perspective:

> It may sound like a contradiction, but you achieve spontaneity on the set through preparation of the dialogue at home. As you prepare, find ways of making your responses appear newly minted, not pre-programmed. In life, we often pick up the thought that provokes our next remark halfway through someone else's speech. Thoughts don't leap to the mouth automatically. [Caine 1997:29]

The absence of rehearsal can, sometimes, be psychologically unnerving and worrying for the actors, who are perhaps used to working in a formal way of developing character through rehearsal, particularly within the theatre. I hoped that by not having these discussions and rehearsals, wherein the characters 'motivations' would be nailed down, I could instil a sense of anxiety in the characters, which would assist in producing edgy performances in the adult performers. Essentially, I felt the father should be on the edge and that Holly should be relaxed and in control.

Scripting Birdman

Having not used a script in my previous improvisation, the outsider may be forgiven to thinking that the research project was being compromised. My intention has always been to test the boundaries of improvisation in a number of ways. Having attempted two script-less films previously, I felt it was time to consider improvisation from another point of view.

A film script does not provide the producer, director or casting agent with a clear representation of the character in a film. It is fair to say that the script fleshes out broad character facts, such as gender, age range, possible build and, if significant, details about specific items of clothing. But a script does not provide insight into the character's gait and body language, or denote the effects of accent and phrasing on the delivery of speech, or indicate the precise pacing of the scene. Neither does the script offer indication of other external character details in terms of costume and make up, unless these are plot specific, or mannerisms, gestures and inflections, all of which provide essential shading to the character. In so far as it would be tempting to believe that choices in scripting inherently define character, we must concede that the character does not exist until he is cast and presented to the camera. It is therefore the actor's choices during performance that ultimately flesh out and define the character, and these are choices that will also be affected by the technology of cinema.

In considering the interface between the actor and apparatus of cinema, we must observe that the a script does not define the photographic properties of the film, with particular regards to composition, lighting, lens choice, aperture and the implications of depth of field etc... Neither does the script define editing choices, when to cut from a wide shot to

close up, the length of the take, when to hold on a reaction shot of a character for effect. Furthermore, a script does not comment on the properties of sound design; what sound effects to use and what style or genre of music to employ for a given effect. Undoubtedly, all these production choices will further determine how we read and interact with character, what we feel about them and, most significantly, how the audience will read the performance.

In brief, we might observe that the value of a script in improvisation, from both actor and directors perspective, is that it provides a route, and takes the guesswork out of creating narrative decisions in the moment. We can say in the process, that this is what is intended. The scene requires us to get to a certain point by the end.

In thinking about how to adapt Almond's story and how to approach improvisation, I was aware that the material could be taken in any number of directions. I had a responsibility to the integrity of the text and that the addition of new materials needed to be in keeping with the author's vision and style. Though not obligated to Almond, I felt that it was important to maintain the fun and sense of family in the original text.

When commenting on the process of adaptation, Syd Field says that 'When you adapt a novel, play, article, or even a song into a screenplay, you are changing from one form into another. You are writing a screenplay based on other material.' [Field, 1982: 153]. In his chapter on adaptation, Field makes much of the process of transformation, moving ideas from one medium to the other. He argues that the writer should be freed from the creative sources; using and working with the source ideas in a dramatic way; remembering to accommodate the needs of the screenplay format. Most significantly, Field argues that the screenwriter is not obligated to remain faithful to the original [Field, 1982: 154] and that 'The original material is source material. What you do with it to fashion it into a screenplay is up to you. You might

have to add characters, scenes, incidents, and events. Don't just copy a novel into a screenplay; make it visual, a story told with pictures'. [Field 1982: 155]

Through a number of email exchanges and face-to-face meetings with Almond, I was able to establish that it would be reasonable to expand story materials around the birdman community, perhaps providing cameo events around the contestants and to flesh out contexts that would help anchor the narrative in the time and context of the birdman event. In starting work on the adaptation, it became apparent that the writer, just like the actor, has to know their characters in order to be in a position to tell you how their personality informs what they do and what they say. It should be remembered that the writer is learning about their character through writing. They improvise, albeit in the privacy of their office, and offer an impression of what the scene could be. Through improvisation, the writer invents a dramatic context and a set of narrative goals, whether these are effective and satisfying for the audience depends on the success of how the events have been fleshed out.

As already expressed, my intention for writing a script was to take the guesswork out of planning 'cause and effect' actions and relationships during the shooting. The advantage of improvising on paper is that everything can be a hypothesis. You do not have to commit to this particular vision, in terms of shooting the material on the day. Effectively, I attempted to explore the possibilities of structure and how possible conversations between two actors could be played out. The *Birdman* screenplay is an example of a Master Scene script, its intention being to paint, in broad strokes, the general action of the scene. As Syd Field says, 'Scenes are made up of shots, either a single shot or series of shots; how many, or what kind, is insignificant.' [1982: 170] The screenwriter's remit does not include writing camera directions, or suggestions of how to shoot the scene. The purpose of a screenplay is to create a

'STORY TOLD WITH PICTURES' [ibid: 7]. A script for Birdman can be found in the Appendices (pp.193-212)

How the character will perform their scripted action is usually only hinted at within the master script, with the characters intention for action being possibly characterised through an adverb. In mainstream practice the director would then typically prepare a shooting script, which takes the master script one step further by breaking down the writer's descriptions and suggested character responses into a series of definitive shots.

'The writer's job is to write the script. The director's job is to film the script; to take the words on paper and transform them into images on film.' [Field, 1982: 168]. To achieve this the director will take the Master Script and transform it into a shooting script, deciding whether to shoot the scene as one 'long take' or break it down into a series of individual shoots that will permit a faster and elliptical editing style. It is often at the point of creating a shooting script that the director begins to shade in character details, placing emphasis on key moments of action, and all *in the absence of the actor*. Essentially, the purpose of the shooting script is to specify the number of shots that make up a sequence, as well as the framing choice, whether to use a Long Shot [LS], Medium Shot [MS] or Close Up [CU] and whether camera movement strategies will be employed, such as a Tracking or a Crane shot. Creating a shooting script forces the director to pre-visualise the direction of the scene, and provides the producer with documentation that will enable the production team to budget and schedule the film accordingly.

In pre-visualising the film, the director will need to think about the pacing of action and performance in relation to the proposed filming strategies. The director will need to bear in mind the collective effect that the pacing of a particular scene will have in relation to

surrounding scenes, as well as the effect this will have on the flow of the overall film. The pacing of a scene is clearly affected by the director's shooting strategy, which is also informed by stylistic choices in relation to genre and other modes of representation. For example, a vérité style drama will be filmed using longer shots, perhaps handheld, rather than breaking action down into a series of carefully managed Close Ups.

When it comes to filming, the duration of a scene will be dictated by the actor's physical actions, rather than the dialogue accompanying the action. A scene comprising of physical actions will typically include breaks in the action in order to provide an opportunity for the actor to deliver dialogue. Once filmed, the real time duration of an action will be truncated and sped up, through editing choices that are elliptical. The real time duration of the filmed action can be lengthened through adding cutaways and applying motion effects to slow the material down.

The Shooting Script offers a precise documented proposal for the planned filmmaking activity. On a practical level it enables the team to schedule the day in advance. I knew that to improvise the sequences, without a shooting script, was going to require that I factor in more time than might usually be allowed in order for the actors and myself to plan the sequence. However, the director needs to recognise that working in this unplanned way will slow the shoot down and not allow other creative members to make a positive contribution to the preparation of the sequence.

In choosing to shoot an improvised film based on the Master Scene description, as opposed to a pre-planned shooting script, I excluded many possibilities of planning, developing character and action before the day of the shoot. Whilst improvisation on the day

clearly allowed the actors to be more fully involved with the organic process of developing character, much was being left to chance.

One cannot know in advance how inventive the actor is going to be on the day, how they will respond to the 'found' environment and props. The pressures of filming and working at speed may inhibit and frustrate creative work, forcing the hand towards predictable shortcuts. Detailed filming of improvised material proved very hard to organise on the day, particularly in terms of planning the number of shots and number of camera setups.

From a logistical standpoint, on average it takes an experienced crew between 20-30 minutes to set up a camera, block the action and light a localised setup. It will take longer when lighting bigger areas and undertaking intricate work with camera movement. Of course the advantage of breaking a simple scene into a decisive number of shots is that it can take between four-five hours to execute. For *Birdman* I thought that if the sequences were filmed in longer takes, as I had done with *Blood Offering,* then clearly it would take much less time to generate the content. Much to the producer's anguish I decided that I was not going to produce a detailed shooting script and that instead I would improvise my filming based around the discoveries of staging that the actors encountered within the 'found' locations; my intention being to allow a block of time on each location.

I knew that throughout the improvisation process the text could change. I was very keen on the actors using the scripted dialogue as a guide, and was less concerned about whether they stayed to the letter of the script. Clearly, when it came to filming, any deviation would need to be repeated, in order to maintain continuity, a problem that plagued filming during *Blood Offering*. I believed that this script would enable them to concentrate and focus on the emotional direction of the scene. In reading the script for *Birdman*, it is worth remembering

that the material is really only a sketch for the film. Although it has the hallmarks of a structured project, particularly in terms of formatting and layout, the material is still an embryonic set of ideas.

In writing the screenplay, I concentrated on the structuring of the material, how and why characters might be in a particular place and engaged in a particular activity. As previously stated, my intention was to let the actors contribute to the writing process, in the way that they improvised their own dialogue, expressions and rhythms of speech.

Filming Birdman

At the start of the process, I did have concerns that the improvisation processes could become compromised, and the acting overburdened, by the technical requirements and a fussy precision that conventional filmmaking practices might impose. Arguably, innovation and a crisp fresh acting style are more likely to be achieved by keeping the production fluid, not prejudicing the work through multiple run-takes, in the pursuit of a glossy cinematic style, a style that demands the tight choreography of camera and action. Out of these initial thoughts I developed a code of practice, a series of 'obstructions'[43] against which I could measure my processes for this project, which included:

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[43] The term 'obstruction' has been appropriated from Lars von Trier & Jørgen Leth's film *Five Obstructions* [2003]. In this documentary, Lars von Trier challenges his mentor Jørgen Leth to remake a short film *Det Perfekte Menneske* [Leth, 1967] in a number of contrasting ways. For each retelling of The Perfect Human, Von Trier imposes a specific production obstacle, resulting in challenges to film form and style.

1. No formal preparation, such as script readings, workshops and character-building experiences.

2. No character psychology or 'interior worlds' are to be discussed. This includes addressing personal values, ambitions or expectations.

3. All motivation must be in the here and now. All character knowledge must be discovered through the improvised performance and experience of the cinematic moment.

4. The actors must arrive only having learnt their lines. No previous attempts at characterisation.

5. No studio work. Only 'real' and unseen locations will be used.

SCREEN: BIRDMAN

Birdman Analysis

To extent Birdman proved to be an unsatisfactory project with improvisation, certainly in terms of how the actors responded to my intended process. There was considerable pressure to complete the shoot in a limited time frame. It was a budgeted project (15k), multiple locations and a large crew. Essentially, much of the energy, enthusiasm and 'life', all of which were evident in the casting process/improvisation workshops, became quickly dissipated at the point of production. To that extent what I was hopping for in the performances did not materialize.

My action plan, which was mapped out in my 'set of obstructions' (pp.126-7), did not take into consideration the needs of either the eight-year old star (Holly) or her on screen father (Martin). On reflection, character-building experiences (see point one) should not have been discounted and certainly would have been ideal within this production context. Budget and time permitting, the shoot days could have been restricted and more 'fun-time' built into the schedule.

The biggest problem was that the actors were not given sufficient opportunity to improvise with the script. Although they were encouraged to relax and let go, both Holly and Martin felt more confident in hanging on to the script. The lines provided a security. Thus point three, 'All character knowledge must be discovered through the improvised performance and experience of the cinematic moment', which was an essential precursor to the project, was substantially compromised and I do feel this shows in some of the performances. However, it should be noted that the actors were very worn out by the shoot. It is as much tiredness that has affected the performance. The penultimate scene, with Lizzie, Jackie and Mr. Poop (time

00.26.23) in the kitchen is quite revealing. The close-ups of Lizzie are quite muted and you can detect the tiredness in her body language, particularly her facial expression. What the viewer won't know is that this scene was shot in a small kitchen, in the height of the summer, with an Aga cooker generating heat/hot water and two HMI's providing a key light for the scene! Whilst the schedule was long, clearly environmental factors, in this case excessive heat, also had an effect.

Similarly, the interior of the shop (starting 00.03.30) was filmed on the last day of the shoot. Again, this proved difficult for the actors, both of whom were untrained actors. The difficulty for Holly was that she was tired and worried that she could not remember her lines. David, the shopkeeper, was worried that his untrained performance would compromise the scene. In fact neither the actors concerns were the source of the problem with this scene. On reflection, the scene is far too long with too much dialogue. Whilst we tried improvising a few takes, the tension between what the actors had learnt and what they were required to do ended up further constricting the performance. Ideally, I should have had two cameras running throughout the Shoot and this would have permitted more license and freedom for the actors. Single camera filming in this structured institutional way, unlike the vérité styles of *Blood Offering* and *Fallen Angels,* is quite restrictive, particularly when camera technology such as cranes and tracks are used.

The scene featuring the Butterfly woman (00. 18.10) was not without it's problems. Although the final scene depicts a Russian speaking character, which was a decision made in post-production, the character actually delivered her lines in English. Obviously Holly naturally understood what was being said at the time. Clearly, had the character spoken to Holly in Russian, then we would have had far more fun and seen a more puzzled expression on Holly's face. Perhaps my director's note should have been for Holly to stick cotton wool in her ears!

The result was a performance that appeared to be a comfortable exchange between the characters, whereas Holly and Butterfly woman should have been nervous and weary of each other.

Whilst I can confirm that the cast did not invent and improvise their dialogue, it is true to say that the performances were invented and spontaneously created in the moment. Nothing was rehearsed or shot multiple times. As much as 85% of what is seen in the completed film is the product of a first take. So it is true to say that these performances were improvised in the moment that they were filmed, returning to Chris Johnston's definition of improvisation 'improvisation is in fact inseparable from the creative process' (2006:xiii). The actors thoughts and responses were not finely honed and calculated but delivered in the moment with no 'preconception as to how [they would] do it' (Spolin, 19991:361).

In placing criticism to one side, many successfully improvised sequences featured in the final film; specifically all the action sequences featuring Holly, whether riding her bike, discovering the camera (00.02.00), using the camera, delivering papers or finding Jackie running across the hilltop. The point is that Holly was not pretending to discover a camera, she actually went through the process for real, even working out how to use the camera and hold it whilst taking a photograph.

The sequence, featuring Dad and Lizzie at the Statue (00.21.50) was perhaps the most successful interaction. At this stage in the shoot, about day three, Holly was comfortable with the filming process and not worn out. It was a morning shoot and energy was high. Holly had tuned into her character and started being more 'controlling' and more maternal. Undoubtedly the characterisation in this scene, as well as other scenes, was supported by the mise-en-scene. The dialogue exchanges were shorter and the overall mood of the edited scene is supported by

the soundscape and music. The scene involved action and reaction to distinct events, i.e Dad jumping off the steps. The improvisation can be seen in Holly, the non-actor, reacting to Dad's public display of daring. It is a genuine moment, born of real observation and concern.

In adhering to my 'code of practice' it is the case that character motivation was not discussed and all locations and settings were unseen prior to the shoot. In this way the actors genuinely experienced each setting and context for the first time. The actors were not really able to explore the environment under their own steam and within the context of the scene, which was quite different when compared to filming *Blood Offering*, during which the actors would take themselves off at various points, often being pursued by a roving camera. The exception being the lighthouse location, where Holly spent half the day whizzing around on her yellow bicycle.

The Impact of Technology on Improvisation

My early concerns about the filming practices using cranes and tracking and how this intervention may affect the performance, turned out to be unfounded. Whilst setting up times were increased, and this lengthy process extended the day and arguably did impact on the performance, the use of the equipment did not hinder the performance specifically.

I feel the use of additional cameras, as previously noted, really is an important consideration in both filming improvisation and supporting the performance process. The productions of *Birdman* and *Blood Offering* were photographed using a single camera, and though I had success and more fluid experience with a single camera on *Fallen Angels*, I do not feel the same could be said of the longer form projects. The distinction was that the *Fallen*

Angels employed a roving single camera and long takes, whereas the other experiments used 'fixed' single cameras and a fragmented production process. Although budgetary needs and schedule necessitated this single camera approach, the restrictions of physical space equally dictated this production constraint. Either way the affect this produced upon improvisation was noticeable. The use of a second camera, which can provide a constant master shot, allows the actor to move freely within the performance space as opposed to staying rooted to a particular place for staging and continuity purposes. This is not to say that commercial studio production is exempt from these production constraints. During the production of soaps and sitcoms, which are typically studio-based events, the director and cast have to accommodate and work around lighting and framing dictates, agreeing some parameters for containing the blocking of action. What photographically works for one camera, in close-up, may not look as good for the second camera, in terms of lighting and framing in the master shot. The advantage of single camera shooting is that one can work on location in limited spaces and the lighting can be more finely tuned on a setup-by-setup basis. For example, the kitchen sequence in *Birdman*, which was an actual location kitchen with functioning Aga (even in the height of summer!), could not accommodate two cameras due to the space and position of the lighting equipment. It was only possible to shoot a master, as it took many hours to set up an establishing tracking shot. The consequence was a slow sequence that provided little variety in shot choice, but allowed the actor to take time and improvise their actions.

A further benefit of using two cameras, each one covering a specific actor, is that when the cast go 'off script', or intentionally improvise, you can capture the genuine actions and

reactions to the newly devised material. There is no need to try and duplicate the material, which would be very difficult anyway.

Overlapping Action

One of the problems I experienced with single camera production, particularly in *Birdman* and *Blood Offering*, was the issue of repetition and overlapping action and movement when working with improvised performances. Creating an editing point, a point where material can overlap, is an essential requirement of upholding and maintaining the continuity editing system. Frequently, in the course of shooting a sequence the director will need to stop filming, perhaps due to the actor or crew making a mistake. If the decision is taken to continue filming, because the director wants to use the first part of the shot, then it will be necessary to insert a cutaway in order to hide the interruption, before returning to the original camera set up and continuing with the material. Typically, this cutaway could be a reaction shot. If the director intends to remain on the actor, he must think about repositioning the camera (at an angle that is greater than 30 degrees from its previous position) in order to avoid creating an unwanted jump cut. After repositioning the camera, the actor is required to duplicate a move or piece of action, which may also include a previous line of dialogue. This overlapping action needs to be executed in such a way as to match the action made in the previous take. The challenge for both the actor and non-professional actor is to repeat these movements, remembering how you stood, where your hands were and what they were doing at a particular point, also where your head was tilted and what you were looking at. Clearly, if the cast are improvising in a free form way, recall of this nature may be impossible, as the

actor is conforming to a predefined routine. It would be unlikely that the actor could remember what they had said or done in a previous take.

Unless the filmmaker is intending to produce a scene that consists of one long take, the majority of film and television scenes comprise a number of shots, which are taken from different positions and edited in such a way as to provide the sense of a continuous and uninterrupted narrative event. It is quite normal to start a scene with a wide shot, revealing the character in relation to the environment and the other characters in the scene. At an appropriate moment, often motivated by an actor's physical movement, the editor will then cut on action to a closer shot, thereby revealing another piece of narrative information. In the continuity editing system, the edit is designed to be invisible in order to maintain the illusion of an unmediated narrative. The moment we become aware of the editing our focus is drawn away from the content towards the form of the material. Editing seems to be most 'invisible' when it is motivated by the logic of cause and effect, question and answer, and is effectively hidden when the editor cuts on action. The director's intention of moving to a series of closer shots is specifically to attract the audience's attention and provide a focus for the scene. In reflecting on the constraints that technology, specifically tight framing and lighting, places on the performance, I decided to dispense with such detail for *The Graduate Workshop* and encourage freedom in the performance.

4.3 The Graduate - A Television Workshop

The Graduate Television Workshop (2010) set out to evaluate the effects that improvisation had on a scripted scene. In doing so, I sought to revisit and extend some of the working processes that had begun in the production of *Birdman*. My intention for the television workshop was to further evaluate the ways in which the improvisation process injects 'vitality' and 'liveness' into the material. Due to a tight production schedule, coupled with the fact that I only had access to Holly for four filming hours in the working day, I was not able to fully examine the relationship between script and improvisation. This was further complicated by fact that I was working with a young untrained actor, who found the fragmentary nature of filmmaking unsettling and tiring. Because of the 'commercial' nature of *Birdman*, I could not afford the latitude to experiment with improvisation as I had in *Blood Offering*. On this occasion my intention for *The Graduate* workshop was to sacrifice the technical polish and slickness of production and favour working with the actors in a collaborative way.

The Graduate DVD section comprises of three performances that were based on an extract of script taken from the feature film entitled *The Graduate* (Nichols, 1967). The bedroom scene takes place about 30 minutes into the original feature film and opens with Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) questioning his relationship with Mrs Robinson (Anne Bancroft). The original film scene is set in a hotel bedroom and Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson are in bed having a post-coital dialogue. The original scene is filmed with a single camera and the action is regularly punctuated with moments that take place in the dark, as the bedroom lamp is turned on and off at various points in the conversation. This was clearly an interesting

directorial decision on the part of Nichols and perhaps suggests that he was looking for a challenging way to represent the estrangement in the characters' relationship. There is a 'coyness' and conservatism to the original staging, which runs contrary to the themes of 'freedom of choice' and 'liberation' that permeate the film. By contrast, I had taken the decision to light the scene and use the material to challenge movement in the material. My intention was to lean towards focusing on the awkwardness of their relationship, in the hope that this could be conveyed through the actor's body language as they move about the performance space, a facet of performance not fully explored in the original presentation.

The first clip shows a performance of the scene before improvisation. The second clip comprises an improvisation based around the scripted material, in which the actors were permitted to take the material in any direction they wished but working through the frustrations in their relationship. The third clip returns to the script and includes some of the improvised material. The supporting analysis, which I shall return to later, offers a commentary on how the improvised responses have been fed into the performance. It is worth noting that these three contrasting scenes are the product of a single practical workshop that lasted for three hours. The workshop started with a read through, in order to allow the material to be blocked for both the actors and cameras. There was no rehearsal and this was the first and only time that the actors had worked with each other. In every way, this situation provided a very close approximation of working patterns that actors frequently encounter in commercial practice.

SCREEN GRADUATE TV WORKSHOP

Improvised Filmmaking in a Studio Context

One of the principal benefits of working with multiple cameras is that the director can immediately cut from one shot to the next according to the rhythmic[44] quality of the performance. On a technical and creative level a multi-camera approach can lead to an organic process of shooting and editing a scene, as the director is able to see the completed sequence as it is played out. In single camera production the director has to pre-visualise how he might cut the sequence and think about the size of shot and its emotional value[45]. In terms of addressing the problems of interrupting the flow of a performance, a multi camera approach can be less invasive at the point of filming as the director can maintain the momentum of the scene, by not having to cut for a reaction shot, or having to pull back and frame for a wide angle. Within this context, it is easy to see how television studio production is not dissimilar to performing within a live theatre context, and that the multi-camera shooting style is beneficial to the performer, as the emotional, physical and psychological momentum can be harnessed and played out to its logical conclusion.

In comparing the three performances of the workshop, I feel that the second recording of, which is an improvisation based on the script, has more vitality than the first recording. The actors do appear more relaxed with each other and take their time to explore the situation. Although the actors are borrowing dialogue from the previously learned script, they incorporate a number of changes and depart sufficiently to allow new spontaneous ideas and

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[44] Here I am referring to the duration of each shot and how temporal patterns are formed according to the length of time given to each shot. For example a shot reverse shot sequence, formed by shot lengths of approximately 4 seconds each, would become predictable over the duration of a scene. Whilst an edited sequence that purely holds on the actor whilst they are speaking, with no reverses, may seem ponderous.

[45] I am referring to the difference between a medium shot (MS), close- up (CU) and extreme close up (ECU) and the visual and emotional impact that this may have on the viewer.

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interpretations of the material to form. As was discussed in *Birdman*, whilst the script is useful in providing a goal post for the action and direction of the scene, it requires the actor to accommodate the beats of the script and to hide these shifts, or make them seem like new thoughts. Arguably, letting go of the script, giving permission to the actors 'to play' is a psychological release. This release enables the actors to put down their guard, which in turn affects the body language. The relaxed feeling of the scene supports the relationship between the couple who are lovers and, as one might expect, would have a very physical relationship. The tension that develops between Ben and Mrs Robinson needs to come out of a shift in Ben's emotional goals, which affects his emotional status in the present.   The third example returns to the script but incorporates the work that was developed in the improvisation. In comparing the first and third examples we can see a marked difference in the body language, with work in the third example being more relaxed and the pacing slower.

In this brief experiment it became obvious that improvisation affords a clear benefit to the performer in being able to explore possible expressions of body language, for example, when and where to move in relation to your partner, when to touch or have a physical interaction with your partner and what type of physical interaction might be appropriate. The actors could choose to use the scripted dialogue or supplement the material with their own ideas and expressions. It is interesting to note that, as with *Birdman*, the actors would often choose to stay with the scripted dialogue. In improvisation what often changes is the actors blocking, in this example there was a tendency to simplify movement. From a technical standpoint, a multiple camera set up makes life much easier, in terms of staging action for the camera and getting cutaways etc… One of the key benefits being that the actor does not have

to focus on making their body language repeatable as the material is edited at the point of filming.

Conclusion: A Way Forward

Defining improvisation as simply the process of 'acting without a written script' is far too restrictive. My research evidences that improvisation is as much the way in which material is delivered, the actor working within a given context and 'permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for [them]..' (Spolin, 1999:361) So therefore it can be understood that improvisation exists in the subtleties of performance, the vocal shading, the nuances of gesture and communication through body language. It is not simply recalling words, whether invented in the moment or scripted. Physical action and interaction are essential components of the improvised and scripted performance alike. Because of this, measuring the impact of improvisation on film, looking for footprints in the medium, is a challenge, particularly without the context of knowing that the work was improvised.

I discovered a method and a way of working that although produced different results, ultimately pointed towards formulating a 'best' practice and arguably a methodology. I can be conclusive about what works for me, even at this early stage in my development as a researcher/practitioner. What problematizes and hinders a more empirical testing of the practice is that; unlike the scientist who can test and retest the results of their experiment to prove exact findings, this research explored a territory that really had no absolute models or 'controls'. Yes, we can say that Mike Leigh has a proven method that employs improvisation, but this is not a 'control' against which you can evaluate the successes, or otherwise, of this praxis. At the risk of being obvious, each creative endeavour offers up a series of variable discoveries.

As I director, I stood outside the actor's experience of improvisation, expecting to understand the actor's internal processes of cognition and reflexivity through my filmmaking activities, particularly, trying to ascertain how the actor's creative responses related to my directorial concerns. As a consequence, it is important to take stock and evaluate how and at what level you can direct improvisation.

Seemingly, the director can always comment on the external characteristics of performance, suggesting to the actor that a particular emotion or intent is not coming across within the performance. Although the emotion may be present, it is, perhaps, not strong enough and the body language does not support the character's intentions. But this requires the director to know what the intentions of the actor might be at any given moment, a performance situation that paradoxically calls for the use of a 'shared' script.

At the point of filming, the director can be objective about the work and can review or playback the scene. However, the actor does not have a 'script', or than the muse that was in their head at a given point. Unlike Leigh's actors, who have had extensive rehearsal, my cast could not readily jump back into a scene, as the impetus or muse driving the material at that moment was lost and not readily accessible. In reality, one would have to reshoot and hope to recover and revisit the territory, but it would not and could not be the same. In adhering to my chosen methodology, wherein improvisation approximated the condition of documentary, you cannot readily direct the improvised scene. The cameras have to roll and the situation and characters have to unfold in the moment of playing.

Consequently, when considering improvisation at the point of filming, I know, more than the actors, that the edit, use of tempo, sound effects and music will support and/or

subvert a given performance. As the director, I was looking for 'truth' in the performance, at least what was truthful to me. What I fully appreciate now is that improvisation can stimulate and grow these 'truthful' moments and, to an extent, these can be enhanced in the edit. Clearly, improvisation is supported by the technical process as well as the visual properties assigned through mise-en-scene.

Improvisation does not provide any quick fix solutions for film production and the quality can be varied. *Blood Offering* was an exciting project full of creative risks: setting off with an ensemble of interesting actors in order to film a physical and spiritual journey with only a few hints as to narrative direction. This was a 'happening', wherein the director empowered the actors to do their own thing. It was not unlike the filming processes of *The Blair Witch Project*. However, where *Blair Witch* adheres closely to the conventions of documentary/video diary, the camera crew of *Blood Offering* are an embedded part of the performance and in one sense are 'invisible' players. The cameras are an intervention within the performance process and it was a constant challenge to second-guess camera placement; specifically, where to place the camera in order to capture the action. By contrast, in a theatrical happening, technology is not generally a consideration and I can be said that the performers' and audience's gaze is omniscient and relatively uninhibited, far greater than the sum of any lens recording a scene. Because of the camera's selective viewpoint, there is a constant need to establish action, geography and spatial relationships between cast members, all of which are necessary for the viewer's understanding of the material.

In thinking about the 'hallmarks' of an improvised performance and, therefore, evaluating it's footprint on the film, two key points spring to mind.

1. Dialogue is slower paced than the scripted or rehearsed counterpart. This is because it takes time for the actors to find the direction of the material and follow the flow. If we take Fallen Angels as an example, the material and purpose of the scene could be edited and compressed into a slighter offering. However, what would be lost in the process? The film as it stands feels like a lazy afternoon and that we are 'hanging' out with these friends. So there is an aesthetic quality that is built up over time and the duration of the scene.

2. The changes of direction, the 'beats'[46], wherein character exchanges are not always joined up and scenes do not always find a neat and tidy resolution, in terms of action and dialogue, are also an indication.

Of course, film craft and technique cannot be reliable indicators of the improvised process. As evidenced in my practice, vérité shooting styles and crash editing techniques enliven the work and evoke a sense of liveness, but this is a layering and a 'deceit'. But is this 'Complex Acting'? In referring back to Kirby's continuum (2002: pp.43-44), without the audience being privy to the context supplied by the direction, specifically that the actors were 'not' to act, viewers are likely believe that they are seeing examples of 'Complex Acting' in both *Fallen Angels* and *Blood Offering*. In the main, the performances are 'natural' and flow. Whereas, the performances of *Birdman* and *Graduate* seem more enacted. As a comparison between that which is fully improvised, alongside work that is partially improvised, we can see how scripted dialogue can be considered a constraint upon the performance. This is

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[46] Weston (1996: 219) comments that '[t]he term "beat" is widely misunderstood to mean changes in mood, or pauses, or something to do with the pace or tempo-rhythm of the scene.' She goes on to say that 'the "beats" are the bits, the little sections of a scene. Stanislavsky called them "units." The simplest, best way to identify them is by *subject* – when the subject changes, that is a new beat.' (ibid)

because in scripted work, dramatic moments are built up very quickly with the emotion and logic directed towards an endgame.

Directing as Intervention

As a director, the relationship between actor and the improvisation has produced some concerns. In *Fallen Angels*, I remained a neutral observer in the filming process, setting up the context and then filming the response. In *Blood Offering* when things didn't come together and I felt scenes needed sharpening up, I tended to fill the void of uncertainty by taking control and 'directing' the material in a more certain way. When this happened, it felt awkward, an intrusion into the process. Towards the end of the shoot, when we were running out of time, the cast began to rely on me as a director, in the conventional sense of the role as this started to erode the integrity of my ambition. Unlike *The Blair Witch Project*, in which Sánchez and Myrick had allowed the actors to take control of the shoot, essentially by not being a physical presence on the set, I realised that my presence was not that of a neutral observer. By contrast, Penny Woolcock's direction of the 'Tina' films proves that it is possible to provide an environment in which non-actors can play with character.

Just as the actor needs an open mind, the director needs to give permission for the actors to experiment, accepting the consequences of the material that is being offered up. With regards to my own practice, in hindsight, I did not fully appreciate until later in the research how spending time with the actors could open out the material. On certain projects I had the dual function of operating the camera as well as directing, my role shifted from being an observer to an active participant. As a result I could not always process the improvisation

and unpick what was going on. The questions you ask yourself when filming are to do with the technical aspects of framing, exposure and focus, rather than those of performance, pacing and direction of the narrative.

Improvisation is not an economical process for both the standpoint of time and money. If one is starting without a script, as was the case with *Blood Offering*, you have to lay the foundations in preparing the actors to the point where they can work intuitively. I recognize that my personal casting process wasn't always reliable in terms of identifying individuals who could work intuitively. In the case of *Birdman*, whilst casting was rigorous, the speed of production and fatigue of the cast and crew, did seem to compromise the process at times; something that could have been alleviated through a generous production schedule, actor's availability and funding permitting.

What conditions are needed to make improvisation work?

The improvisation experience needs to start with an impetus. In Hollywood terms this can take the form of problem or question (who, what, when, where, how and why) – these are the questions that will provide a sense of direction and purpose for the character. Linked to this, improvisation needs structure, a direction of how to play out the material for dramatic effect, as this resulting narrative will need to be shaped. The question that my research has not resolved is 'what comes first.   The structure or the character?' Of course, the uncompromising answer is that both are possible starting points. However, it should be noted

that even a great character needs a solid structure to challenge and exhibit their prowess. A structure without great characters does not equally result in entertaining films.

Actors need to start the improvisation process with a defined character, to support the direction of a narrative. The character's goal may be to achieve a specific task or mission, but this needs to be developed both on and off screen, so that the filmmaker and actor can jump into the story at any point. In Leigh's films, we do not often see overt motives, for example in *Happy-go-lucky* (2008), Poppy decides to learn to drive, but we don't know why. Likewise, she takes up dancing, but we don't know why. There is a matter-of-fact quality that underpins the motivations of Leigh's characters, and we never feel that his characters are 'on a mission'.

Improvisation, then, is a tool and a means of getting close to the 'real emotion' as opposed to the synthesized emotion, but it needs to be planned. 'Paradoxically, the most successfully spontaneous forms of performance may be those in which spontaneity is relatively planned and predictable.' (Auslander 2002: 64) The ability to: 'write the material in the moment of playing'; to 'keep emotions fresh'; to 'make a performance come alive', are all statements that, irrespective of the artistic medium, sit comfortably within a working description of improvisation. It is worth remembering that the improvising actor can lay claim to having a greater connection with the material, in contrast to the characterisations of scripted drama. The improvising actor has to build deeper connections with the character and to undergo the same processes of development as a scriptwriter, a process that needs time to 'bed in' and influence performance. Long form Improvisation is an immersive process, developing from the seed of an idea, and through an experimentation process that enables the actor to discover the emotional and psychological centre of a character. Had it been possible to pay actors or engage their voluntary services for a longer period, not to the extent of Mike Leigh's six-

month development period, but perhaps six weeks, then I feel the work in *Blood Offering* could have had more opportunity to be opened up.

As it stands, the process of the actor becoming immersed in character development begs some interesting questions; to what extent can the non-actor move from the position of 'how would I feel about this' to 'how does my character feel about this?' In other words, is the symbiotic relationship of actor and fictional character separable? Whether the actor's enacted feelings are produced through emotional recall, or whether they are 'invented', it would be logical to conclude that 'real' emotions must inform the performance. We know that trained actors are encouraged to do this, but what of the non-actor? Are we seeing no pretence on the screen? Is not the non-actors experience, as being filmed, the very thing that makes the film natural. If it is, and depending on the journey of the narrative, ought we not to question the ethics of such improvised ventures?

The challenge of filming whilst you improvise, is that the actor and filmmaker acquire the pieces of the jigsaw as they progress. No one is ever in control or has a full picture of the character and story events in advance. This is hard to chart at a technical level, but it is equally difficult to ensure that the characters are being consistent. To avoid such inconsistencies in my future work, it is worth identifying a model of practice that has clear boundaries. I concede that any such model will be flawed, but that it may honed by experiences that have gone before.

To what extent does the production of *Fallen Angels* and *Blood Offering* mirror the improvisation practices of other filmmakers? The characters of *Fallen Angels* were honed from the imagination. They were fed by the stimuli of discussion and personal investigation,

between actor and director. The resulting film was a response to their invented characters and the situation they found themselves in. As previously mentioned, the characters were capable of far more than was offered, and in post filming conversations I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the actors had begun to understand their potential and ambitions. In reflecting on the process of creating character, I can see that *Fallen Angels*, perhaps, is an approximation of the kind of development work that Leigh undertakes in his formative improvisation process. What is offered up in *Fallen Angels* is a 'happening'. I surmise, that for Leigh this type of filmic event would be considered a starting point in his process, from which he could further finesse and refine material rather than use it as an element within his narrative. However, I feel this work exists in its own right and has the distinct merit of being fresh and unrefined.

I worked with untrained actors, by that I mean they generally had no experience of film, but did have limited experience in theatre. Certainly the cast of *Fallen Angels* and *Blood Offering* had no experience of improvising on film, or indeed improvising in this direct and non-repeatable way. I used improvisation, not to develop or explore ideas, as a performance mode, comprising one long-take and no repeats. Emphatically, they were asked not to act or overtly emote, I was looking for a more subdued and considered performance, based in interaction and listening. The critic might posit the observation 'how easy is it for an actor, not to act?' With certainty, I noted that I found little differentiation between the actors off screen and on-screen personas. This should not be a surprise as I cast the actors for who they were, not what they could be, which is completely at odds with the standard approach to casting. In this way Spolin's axiom was found to be a truism, my cast certainly could act and improvise. It really is a matter of the extent to which the actor is prepared to play and whether they can ignore or subdue their inhibitions.

The use of undeveloped actors in this PBR context was, in part, economically determined as well as an artistic decision. Of course, from a commercial position, had I been producing material for broadcast and/or public consumption, rather than experimentation and research then this approach would have been regarded as a high-risk strategy. My cast were happy to engage with this work in an educational context, the actors didn't come with unrealistic expectations and pretentions. They were happy to respond to the dramatic situation. They were happy to play. For the process that I was investigating, it mattered not whether I used trained or untrained actors, as long as the apparatus was capable of capturing the performance. In this sense my filming methods were closer to those of Woolcock, Myrick and Sánchez. But Leigh's process in character development and even rehearsal provides background and detail that a more 'documentary' approach lacks. Leigh pushes his actors and uses improvisation and extensive rehearsal to drill down into the material a very particular way. Likewise, through the use of constant repetition and endless retakes, Bresson was able to subjugate his actors, submit them to his will. Then perhaps Leigh's process invites his actors to behave in a way that is not distant from Bresson's automatism of his cast.

Future Models and Methods

In thinking about my next steps with improvisation, I can see merit in drawing on 'stock' character types and/or archetypes as a starting point. Taking characters who represent a 'point of view' and then putting them into a situation where these views will meet conflict is certainly a guaranteed way to generate drama. Formulated by Theophrastus nearly 2000 years ago (see appendix p 222), lists of character types/stock characters are not unusual; the

character types of *Commedia* being yet a further iteration. Vladimir Propp, in his *Morphology of Folktale* (1968) proposes a slight list of eight discrete character types[47] and their functions. This offers the dramatist a simple paradigm, a shorthand way of identifying the binary qualities of character, albeit within the given generic form of a folktale. Propp's basic character types can be viewed as raw building blocks that are devoid of a moral centre and social 'status', the exception being the princess and her father, which have obvious hierarchical implications. Whilst thinking about the possibility of incorporating Propp's character types into a future improvisation workflow, I also began to explore and revisit other models of character type and archetype, initially, looking at the characters presented within the work of Commedia dell'arte and going back to The Characters of Theophrastus[48]. Where Propp's character types suggest function, Theophrastus' stock characters reveal a greatly expanded understanding of character attributes and the list codifies character type not on the basis of occupation and social standing, but through assigning dominant personality traits.

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[47] **Vladimir Propp's - Stock Characters**

1. The villain (struggles against the hero)
2. The donor (prepares the hero or gives the hero some magical object)
3. The (magical) helper (helps the hero in the quest)
4. The princess (person the hero marries, often sought for during the narrative)
5. Her father; Propp noted that functionally, the princess and the father cannot be clearly distinguished
6. The dispatcher (character who makes the lack known and sends the hero off)
7. The hero or victim/ seeker hero, reacts to the donor, weds the princess
8. False hero/anti-hero/usurper — (takes credit for the hero's actions/ tries to marry the princess)

[48] Theophrastus (371 – c. 287 BC), a former pupil of Aristotle produced 'a collection of 30 short character-sketches of various types of individuals who might be met in the streets of Athens in the late fourth century BC. It is a work which had a profound influence on European literature, and this is a detailed and elaborate treatment of it'. Diggle, J (2004) (ed) *Theophrastus Characters*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

I can foresee that one of the possible dangers in developing improvisations around character models is that the actor can be seduced into playing only the 'dominant' attitude, and that this expression of attitude will become an emotional prop. In recalling Johnstone's improvisation games centred upon exploring the role-play of master/servant (1981: 62), it is easy to see how the material created out of the specifics of this character type can be played solely for its comic value. An important aspect in both Johnstone's practices, as well as the structure of *Commedia*, is the audience's recognition of what these characters stand for; they are either Vecchi or Zanni. This binary tension generates narrative situations in which the servant typically tries to usurp or thwart their master's wishes. Clearly the perceived benefit of improvisation is that it helps to avoid playing out superficial characters by accessing more complex understandings of the 'inner' conscious. From the standpoint of organising the structural elements of story and the character interactions, it is useful to think about character and narrative function. Even at the point of devising a character, one is forced to question 'what moral and spiritual 'value' does each character represent?' This was especially significant whilst working with the Satanic oriented materials that informed *Blood Offering*.

In future experiments with improvisation, working with stock characters, or more specifically character types, would be a way to support the actors and help separation them from their character work. Furthermore, it would provide a clear set of motivations to support improvisation with these characters. Taking into consideration lessons that have been learnt from my practical research, undoubtedly all characters will benefit from a structured development process and my proposed method will be as follows:

1. To provide actors with practical shared experiences. Start by improvising in a lose way to explore character and create backstory. *Fallen Angels* process *of* characterisation and short half-day improvisations worked well.

2. Develop a narrative sequence, formulated from using the initial experiments created in exercise One. The narrative structure or, as Mike Leigh terms it, a 'shooting script' is not for sharing with the cast, it is specifically the director's notes/overview. When I previously shared the structure of *Blood Offering* with the cast, it provided too much information and suggested ideas that were not worked through. Furthermore, it tended to steer the actors thoughts as an improvisation endgame.

3. Film the main story arc in chronological order, where possible letting the actors steer material. Use two cameras. Don't rehearse unless essential, shoot only ONE take of the scene.

In adding to this schema, I would also endorse a number of the Dogme Manifesto rules (see appendix p.223), specifically points 1,2,3, 6 & 7. I am in no doubt that manifestos and models of practice are much contested, and for a variety of reasons. They are intentionally provocative and deliberately restrictive. However, as I discovered, constraint in film form is a valuable boundary. Once the limits of the exercise have been negotiated, artists on both sides of the camera are free to operate in interesting and experimental ways. Whilst the editing provides a further point of filtration, the core material has to be in place, as the improvised form does not easily permit re-articulation in the cutting room.

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SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Disk 1

Dark Summers: *Fallen Angels* (2005) and *Blood Offering* (2005).

Disk 2

Playing with Improvisation: *Birdman Improvisations* (2008) and *The Graduate Workshop* (2010).

Disk 3

Learning to Fly: *Birdman* (2009)

APPENDICES

Interview Transcript

Will Howe in conversation with Penny Woolcock (Date of Interview: 15/12/05)

WH: What kind of education and training did you have, specifically with regard to improvisation?

PW: Well I didn't train at all. I came to filmmaking quite late. I was in my, kind of, late thirties and the way it happened was that. I've had a kind of weird life really. I was brought up in Argentina and then ran away from home and then spent… I came from quite a sort of upper middle class background… and then spent about fifteen years as a single mother on the breadline.

WH: In Argentina?

PW: No here. So either on social security or on income support, because the jobs I was getting were so low paid. I'm bringing it up because it's quite important, because I had this long period, which is unusual for somebody who's middle class, of being completely skint. So there's something about that that I understand from my own experience, which I think makes me less patronising perhaps, than the way other filmmakers; you know when they're making films about people who haven't got any money. One of the jobs that I then kind of stumbled into, because I had a child when I was sort of eighteen and I didn't go to university or anything, I became a youth worker for a while. Again, just sort of running youth clubs and helping out on what they used to call YOP schemes.

WH: Yes, I remember those schemes.

PW: I was doing some sort of drama with a group of young women, quite troubled young women, who had been on bail or whatever. We did a play and then they said, 'Oh well, let's do something else now,' so I said, 'well, would you like to make a film?' I knew nothing about making films. Nothing. I didn't even realise that films were made out of different shots. I didn't know that a director was a job that you could do. So I can't tell you how kind of 'other' that whole world was. But, somehow or other, we made this improvised drama, where

two of the girls in the group were the main characters. We all worked on it together and made this, actually, not very good film, which somebody at Channel 4, by some fluke, saw in a workshop. And then I was a director. So I've never worked my way up. I've never assisted anybody else. In a way, everything I've done, I've kind of had to make it up. So as time has gone on, I've obviously learnt the craft and I have, you know, certain levels of confidence and competence hopefully; but never through actually observing what people do, or by doing any courses. So, it's just something that's kind of evolved really, a working practice.

WH: So this early film, would it have been on video?

PW: It was on what they call high-band. I borrowed equipment from the local film workshop. I was living in Oxford at the time. They lent me this equipment and I asked a couple of people to help me crew it. I said, 'I'm making a film for Channel 4.' I didn't realise that actually you were supposed to get a commission or anything; I just assumed that this is what you did, that you just made your film. That is in fact what happened. I think I've said this before, but it's true, even now people will say, 'Oh that's very original, the way you do that.' And I'm thinking, 'Oh, I thought everybody did it like that.' So as the budgets that I've had got bigger, so *The Death of Kinghoffer,* which was probably the biggest budget anyway, we hired a cruise liner and recreated the invasion of Palestine by Zionist forces in 1948 and everything. You know the first AD was saying, because I wasn't giving him shot lists or anything, and he'd worked as an AD on feature films, he found it an interesting but very different experience. I kind of made it up really.

WH: So when was that?

PW: So that was in 1986, or something like that.

WH: Did the production have a title at all?

PW: It was called *Not a Girl Anymore*. It was really bad, (laughs) really, really bad!

WH: You must have got a lot of inspiration out of that to carry on.

PW: Well, what happened, it was like somebody who's a junkie having their first shot of heroin. It was an addiction, and I got such a high out of it. I did feel that I was completely out

of my depth. I didn't know what I was doing. I genuinely didn't. But it brought together all these things that I was interested in, because I'd always written and painted. So it was like the visual side and the writing side. I love going out and exploring and being with different people and telling stories and all that. So it was like all these things that I'd enjoyed and I was, sort of, inspired by, all came together. It just seemed like the perfect thing.

WH: When you say you got a commission…?

PW: Oh I didn't get a commission. No, I didn't know you had to get one! I didn't understand how. I thought if you were going to make a film for television, you made a film and then I wasn't sure what happened. I assumed that something happened, whereby your film would be shown. But you know, I was not even on the radar of understanding anything and actually what did happen was that somebody from Channel 4, from something called *Eleventh Hour*, went to visit the Oxford Filmmakers Workshop. This was a formal arrangement. I wasn't even a member of the workshop. I just borrowed their equipment. They showed him the films that they'd made and he wasn't interested in any of them, and he said well have you got anything else? They said, "well this woman came in here and she borrowed our equipment and she made something with some teenagers, do you want to see it?" So it was total fluke. He watched the film and felt that it had energy and asked to meet me. It kind of went on from there.

WH: Did they then take that film, broadcast it and use it in that way?

PW: Yeah, they did. It was broadcast. I think it was even broadcast twice, which was to great embarrassment as I would like it never to appear again. And of course, it hasn't really. It was shown at half past eleven at night.

WH: How long was this film?

PW: Half an hour. But you know, it wasn't any good or anything like that. But I think I was just trying to do something. I think what this Rod Stone actually thought was "here's somebody who might be doing something interesting in the future," that sort of thing.

WH: Well he was obviously very inspired. So prior to making this film had you produced anything with actors? You made mention of the fact that you'd undertaken a play, was that the first time you'd been involved in drama and working with actors?

PW: Yeah, when I was eighteen, in Argentina. For a short period, I left school and I kind of fell in with this group. I was desperate to discover a more exciting life than the British Community in Buenos Ares, which was totally stifling. I wandered around and met, I mean it sounds very strange, I met this poet on a street corner who said oh they're doing auditions for a play, do you want to come? So, I sort of went along and it was a very kind of sixties play called *Liberty and Other Intoxications*. There was some chap who'd worked with The Living Theatre who were, sort of, very well known at that time. So we did this, it was almost like a series of very provocative sketches, that would be totally embarrassing and pretentious now, where we'd all leave the stage and pretend to be sick on people in the audience. We were immediately arrested and thrown into prison. It was a time of military dictatorship. So that was the end of my theatre career really. After that, I didn't have anything to do with any kind of performance or anything for almost twenty years. Then, when I was a youth worker, I was running this YOP scheme and I thought it was better to find out what young people were interested in and get them to do that. They had an enormous amount of energy and commitment and I never had any kind of trouble with people not wanting to turn up, because they were coming in on days when they weren't supposed to be there.

WH: So you didn't suggest let's do a play, or anything like that?

PW: No. No, it's just like you'd see what people wanted to do. So we set up and had a magazine, we had a band and then we had this theatre group. Then there was this group of girls who fancied doing that. So it was very like an organic process really. It wasn't that I thought I knew anything about acting.

WH: How did you then slot into that mode of working?

PW: The working with actors, like everything else I've done, has been a bit of trial and error really. I gradually worked my way towards what it was that interested me, and that worked well for me. So it wasn't that I immediately knew. Working with these girls, it sort of came out of this group. It was a mixed group, which is unusual. There were some girls from, kind

of, rough housing estates. There were a couple of more middle class girls. Class was one of those things that was being discussed a lot in this group and that's what this half hour drama was all about. It was about two girls who encountered each other on a night out and they'd go and get completely pissed and kind of start up this unlikely friendship. Which was really a reflection of what was happening in this group, where people were discussing their differences and also certain things that they had in common. It was also a bit banal, but that's what it was. It came out of what concerned them. I suppose this, and maybe this is leaping forward, but for me I would say that 95% of getting a good performance is casting. So, I'm not interested in very technical acting. The sort of acting, the kind of Meryl Streep type acting, where there's a lot to admire. I think there are a lot of British actors like that as well. There's a very kind of thespian thing, which is 'giving this performance'. You can see the wheels turning and admire what's going on, but you don't believe it for a second. But some people really like that, and there's certainly a lot of craft involved in doing that, but it doesn't interest me at all. So I like to try and cast quite close to, at least something that that person has.

WH: There's a lot that I want to ask you about casting, what is it that you look for with in a non-actor?

PW: See, I don't really make a distinction between, I know that some people talk about 'real' people and actors, and I don't do that. I think it's sort of insulting to everybody in a way. It's insulting to actors, who are of course real people, as if they're sort of pretending; also for the non-professional actors, because it's not easy to give a performance, to be in something and not to be self-conscious. I personally, if there was a camera, and you asked me to walk across a room, I would walk across a room in a very funny way. Because I would be aware that I was being filmed and I'd find it impossible to do it in an unselfconscious kind of way. So some people can act and some people can't. I think it hasn't got that much to do with whether, or not, people are trained, or how much experience. Maybe people can increase their range. Certainly they can learn lines, which is very difficult to do if you're semi-literate. But, in terms of actually being able to do that thing, I think people have it or they don't.

WH: Critics make a distinction between actors and non-actors and the moment you do that you are faced with the issue of well 'what is an actor'? I suppose the moment you ask

somebody, even if you take them off the street, to do something, you can't just ask them to 'be', because that promotes questions about who am I, what am I, what is it that they are asking, when they are asking me to be me. It suddenly promotes that self-consciousness. How do you avoid that self-consciousness, because a trained actor is obviously training to receive direction? How does that chemistry work with people who aren't trained?

PW: Not everyone can do it. So I wouldn't go and get any old person off the street. I cast people I know. Knowing whether or not somebody can do it, it's just an instinct, actually.

WH: So there's no checklist?

PW: There's no checklist. One of the things is that I get to know people before hand, and then I quite often write for them. For example, in the Tina films I spent months on those estates getting to know people, and I cast 'people'. In some cases, they were actually very close in both occupation and character to the people they were playing. In some cases, they weren't at all. For example Kelly, who plays Tina, is not a shoplifter. But she buys from shoplifters, because that's how people get their stuff. So she knows that world very well. She's a much, much, bubblier person than Tina. So people meet Kelly and go 'Oh. She's not that girl!' No, she fucking isn't. That was an amazing performance, because the whole thing with Tina is that she's gritting her teeth and she's getting on. She's a survivor. But she's not particularly humorous, whereas Kelly is quite hilarious.

WH: So, did you have to constrain Kelly's performance?

PW: No, but I knew that there was something of Kelly that was like that. So that I knew that it was within her range. That's part of what she does is this very bright focused kind of battling sturdy little person. It wasn't that she was 'having to' pretend to be like that, because that is her as well.

WH: If in reality she's this bubbling person, what kind of advice were you giving her?

PW: There are various things that I do with non-professional actors and also with the professional ones, or whatever you call them. For me, the preparation is getting to know people, so that I feel very comfortable with them and they do with me; that they trust me, and that I'm not going to make a fool of them. So that, if I'm wanting to hang them out to dry,

which is kind of what I want to do, I want them to kind of peel off and go out there and be confident that I'm not going to make them look foolish. People will only really let themselves go if they feel that you're going to catch them, because otherwise they'll protect themselves, because they have to. So, for the Tina films, I spent months hanging around on the estate and getting to know people and then I constructed the scripts.

WH: Were these local estates?

PW: They were all in Leeds. They were in and around Leeds. It wasn't just one estate, although one estate was just the centre of it. There were, maybe, two or three estates that I spent time in. Then we filmed in some of the others, because the geography was an imaginary place, whereby somebody would turn a corner and they were then in another estate. That's just film stuff, but there was a reason for it. Because I felt I was saying something about a particular culture, not about an individual estate. This kind of alternative economy happens everywhere. So with that, I then wrote the scripts based on lots of stories that I'd heard. I put different stories together, for example, in *Tina Goes Shopping* the Aaron character says he's going to kill a cow, and he kills the cow. Then he sells bits of it around the estate for a fiver. Then this bit of meat travels all around for a fiver.

WH: Did that actually happen?

PW: Well that was a mixture of a story, not just one, but many cow rustling stories. But people do it. In fact what happens is, it's much more complicated, because it's incredibly difficult to kill a cow in a kitchen. Apparently, it puffs up with poisonous gases and it explodes everywhere and, you know it's then incredibly difficult to chop it up, because being a butcher is a craft. It's a skill and you have to be an apprentice and so on and people don't know how to do it. Then apparently you have buckets and buckets and buckets of entrails as well, which nobody wants and you have to somehow get rid of. So I've heard these stories, which are always told in great hilarity and people are saying, 'I came back and found sheep in the bath,' or a pig, or whatever it was. So I knew about that. There was another story I've heard, about a leg of lamb that travelled, that came off the back of a lorry and that travelled around the estate for a fiver. This woman had said that it ended up back at her house, even though she'd originally sold it.

What interested me about that is, for me, the whole cow story is the story about people who don't have a fiver, and five pounds is nothing these days. Yet, if you make a film about poor people on the housing estate, where nobody has a fiver, it's like, who wants to watch that? It's very condescending. So it was a way of showing that a fiver was actually quite a prize possession, that you could get weed or meat or whatever, or pay off the debt collector and that people had to borrow a very tiny sum of money, but doing it in a funny sort of way. This is a film, in a way, about poverty and the black economy, without saying that's what it's about. So I knew people, I had that story and decided that I would have Tina's boyfriend being the one that killed the cow, but that instead of a leg of lamb he would pretend that it was a leg of lamb.

The Queenie character, the very large lady with all the children, who's supposed to be Tina's aunt, they'd never met before and they live on different estates. They're not related and they don't know each other. The debt collector who comes in, so for example the day that the debt collector's supposed to go in and threaten her, I don't like rehearsing, so the preparation thing is just getting to know people and getting to feel very comfortable. In the case of the Tina films, I didn't show anyone the script either. Because I didn't want them to start thinking about how they were going to start performing, and then I thought they would begin acting in a way that I didn't want, or to start getting kind of hammy, or whatever. So everybody knew the story.

WH: So how did that work Penny? When you'd eventually decided on a cast did you have a pre-production meeting or rehearsal phase?

PW: No, there's no rehearsal phase. So, I'd gone round and I'd spent time and I asked people whether they wanted to be in the film. They said that they did. So I wrote it for particular people. I then explained to everybody who was going to be acting in the film that there was going to be the dead cow, that there were going to be drugs and that there was going to be a certain amount of violence. So that nobody afterwards was going to see this film and go 'I didn't know I was in a film where this happened.' So that, for example, Liz who plays Moon, this character with the very long hair, is a vegetarian. So I said, 'Liz there's a scene with this dead cow draped all over a kitchen, are you ok to be in a film where that happens?' I felt that

was ethical, that everybody knew. But I didn't want them thinking about what they were doing too much.

WH: *So nobody ever had a script?*

PW: Nobody had a script. I also didn't write dialogue in that script, because it's difficult to learn lines if you're not used to it. You know some of the people in the film were literate and some less so. So Kelly definitely is and Gwinn, who plays The Don, who actually really is her father, is. Actually, he reads a lot, mainly in prison. He's had the opportunity to catch up on your Dickens, you know. So everybody understood, more or less, what the story was, but didn't know exactly. We then scheduled it the way you schedule a normal drama.

WH: *So how long did it take to make this film then?*

PW: Well, we shot it. I think we had, sort of I can't remember exactly, but eighteen days or something like that?

WH: *Eighteen days?*

PW: Yeah, which is not a lot actually. I didn't light it either. So we scheduled it. And I paid people, because this is a drama and it's not a documentary. In a documentary you turn up, people are there, or they aren't there, or they do or they don't do, whatever it is that they said they were going to do. You accept it, because this is life. In this case, I wanted to make sure that people were there and that they were going to be kind of 'mine' for the period, and they would do what I said and it was a job. So we paid them.

WH: *You paid them Equity rates?*

PW: Yes. I think what we did, because this was in… I can't remember now…was it 98 or 99? We paid people £100 a day. So that people who were working over several days in a week were actually getting more than the Equity rate.

WH: *This is Equity minimum I guess?*

PW: Yeah, Yeah… It was a tiny budget.

WH: *How much roughly?*

PW: I think it was £200,000 or something like that. But this is for an hour's drama, you know (laughs). So it was scheduled. We didn't have costume or make up or anything. There was a make up person only for a day where the smack head gets beaten up in the pub and has a bloody face. And I just told people just to wear the same clothes every day, because we had to have some sort of continuity

WH: That must have been a nightmare, was it?

PW: Well not really, because I don't have continuity people. Even on the bigger films. I just ask people to try and pay attention to what they are doing. So we would turn up on the day. Graham, my cameraman, DOP or whatever, would sometimes change a light bulb, if we were doing a night scene.

WH: Put a higher wattage light bulb in?

PW: Yeah, put a higher wattage light bulb in and that was it. So that there was no hitting of marks or anything like that, it's like everyone could go where they wanted, do what they wanted and we followed them

WH: So it's a very documentary technique?

PW: A very documentary technique. Which is how I always shoot. So, in a way we're following the action, we're not anticipating it. So you get the feeling that you're watching something that's really happening, even though it's a conceit, you know.

WH: What format were you using?

PW: It's 16mm.

WH: This is all 16mm! Gosh, doesn't that present technical problems in terms of changing the magazine and the other technology?

PW: Well you've got ten minutes [of film] rather than an hour, or whatever it is, you get on tape. I don't think it's different. No.

WH: It wasn't a problem?

PW: No. So that, for example, take the day where the debt collector comes to Queenie's, which is a good example from the performance side, she knew. The night before, I'd gone around and I'd said to Gwen, who plays Queenie, 'Tomorrow, we're going to do the scene with the debt collector. He's going to come in and really terrorize you and you're going to have to think of something good, to persuade him, because otherwise he's going to break your legs.' So we turned up there at, whatever time it was, ten or eleven in the morning. We never started filming very early because people who are unemployed tend not to get up very early. So we had quite short but very intense filming days. Normally, you'd turn up and there's a lot of lighting etc… whereas, we would turn up and start shooting.

WH: Sort of 'out of the back of the car'.

PW: Yeah. So I turned up and went into Gwen's. Gwen was very tearful and she said, 'I've been up all night and I've been thinking about our Sarah who…' Gwen had eight or nine children rather than the eleven, which is what I'd given her in the film. Sarah was a daughter who'd died when she was five. She said, 'I've been thinking about our Sarah, all night. I'm ready now, because I'm going to lose it.' I mean, she prepared the way that Method actors do. I never told her to do that. She'd got herself into the zone by thinking of and accessing a memory. She said, 'You have to go now.' So I thought, oh shit! The other women were there. We went out. Colin, who was playing the Monday man, the debt collector, had never meet Gwen and he was from a different estate. I ran out and said to Graham, 'we're going to have to go now, because Gwen's going to loose it.' I said to Colin, 'OK?' He knew he was playing the debt collector, and I said, 'That's the house. We're going to follow you. Just go in there and don't knock or anything. Just boot the door open. When you go in, the woman who you're asking the money off is the big one who's lying on the couch. There's an empty chair, as you go in on the right, and I want you to sit in that chair. And you're going to terrorize her, because she's been pissing you about. Every week she's been fobbing you off. So you've had it now. You are going to do something horrible to her, but at a certain point she's going to tell you something and you're going to believe it.'

WH: Did you know what she was going to tell him?

PW: No. I didn't. So he said, 'Ok "and we just rolled sound, you know, 'Action!' and he just bolted down the path and we followed him.

WH: You didn't have two cameras. You just had the one?

PW: No, we just had one camera. I said to Graham, 'On the first take,' because I felt that she was going to be, that's when we were going to get the best performance, I said, 'Stay on Gwen most of the time for the first take.' So we went in and we did that. Actually, when Gwen tells her story as Queenie, about this massive cyst and cancer, or whatever, she was quite tearful. We used the first take, because that's when she had it, and she wasn't as good in the other ones. But then I noticed that, as she's telling the story, Liz, who was sitting next to the Monday man, who was playing Moon, believed her and started crying and genuinely thought it was true. So, I poked Graham and got him to do a cutaway of Liz, who had this tear rolling down her cheek, because she really believed that Gwen was terminally ill. Then we did it again. I don't know how many times, two, three or four times

WH: So how many takes on average?

PW: Never more than seven. With that scene, we would cover it mainly all the way through, but never entirely. Because it's nice to move the camera, a bit on the Queenie character, then we would cover the Monday man. So that when he says, 'I'm going to Black and Decker your fucking feet', which I think is sort of a great line, that was his line you know. I didn't write that, he came out with it. The other thing that he say's is, "Oh well, people have to pay me. End of." And 'End of,' became this thing that you'd encounter on the street, or in offices and people go everywhere, 'End of.' That's Colin's line, so I can't take any credit for that. We would cover it mainly on her, mainly on him. We would do a wide shot and then we might run it again, to get the reactions

WH: So would you always have a strategy of doing a wide shot first and then…?

PW: I tend to do the Close-Ups first, which is the opposite of what people normally do. I sort of feel that, quite often, the intensity of the performance is more at the beginning.

WH: It's in the first take, isn't it?

PW: Not necessarily the first. It varies. Some actors will hit it like the third or the fourth or something like that. But it tends to b. I think the earlier that you get the… because partly we're all completely terrified, and we don't know what were doing, and we really don't know if it's going to work. I think that somehow, that edge of terror and chaos can give something quite special.

WH: How do you get round the fact that, because you haven't pre-planned movements and things, the moment you decide to then go back and do the wide shots, there's probably going to be no continuity of action?

PW: Because amazingly people tend to more or less the same thing every time.

WH: It's not that different then.

PW: It's not that different. It's so funny. I mean, generally, you know, say in the scene where, again it's using the same house where the children are all hiding from the bailiff, from what they call the washer man, I would say to them, 'Remember where you hid? Next time do it the same.' And, you know people would. Occasionally, someone would go, "was I next to you?" People just take care of it themselves. I always think you spend hours on questioning was this glass half full, or whatever, and anybody who's noticing that, well it just means that the scene isn't working anyway. So I'm not too bothered about continuity really. It more or less takes care of itself, people will more or less do the same thing and I ask them just to be careful.

WH: How do you know, if you're following the cameraperson, what you are looking at? I guess there's no video assist or anything like that?

PW: I don't like video assist, because I actually want to be there in the situation. Firstly, they always go wrong, so you've got another piece of equipment that's constantly not working, which completely drives me mad. Secondly, particularly if you're filming on location, you've got quite small spaces. So, actually, you don't want a whole other thing. So it's very, very rare that I would use it, almost, never. I think there's been the odd time where's there been some reason.

WH: So you're completely relying on your own gut instinct then?

PW: Well, I know the cameraman very well and we have a way of communicating. Graham and I have worked together for a long time, so I kind of know what he's doing. Before the take I'll say, more or less, what I'd like him to do. Mostly, I've got one eye on the actors, which is my main eye, and then I'm also aware of what Graham is doing. At the end of each take we have a little confab. If I've asked him to be very tight or something, and I've seen where he's been, I'll go, 'You didn't get the moment where so and so said this?' or whatever, and he'll go, 'No. I lost the focus completely at that point.' So he tells me.

WH: Gosh you've got to have a very good memory….

PW: Yeah, well we both do. So he goes through where it worked really well and where it didn't and I'll have noticed if there's something special that I really want. And I can see that he wasn't on it. Then I'll make sure that the next time he picks that up. So that if you've got a story to tell, you've got to get the main elements of it. And I will cover certain key things in a close up afterwards. Maybe you don't use it, but actually you only ever regret the things that you don't shoot. So I shoot quite a lot

WH: I guess your shooting ratio is about a 6:1 ratio?

PW: No, more than that, I guess. I don't know, what was it on the Tina films? Maybe 14:1. Might be that, I can't remember. Which is sort of high-ish, but not Stanley Kubrick high-ish!

WH: You've never been pushed to working on video then? Was there a reason why you chose film as a medium, as opposed to video?

PW: I like the quality of film. Also, I think I felt that given we were, again I'm just talking about the Tina films, that we were making films about people who didn't have any money and so on, I didn't want it to look cheap. And also I like the sense of occasion. When you're turning over and this is it. You're not shooting everything, all the time, without any regard. So there's something about film that sort of feels special. That I just like. So it's not really a very thought out thing. I just, kind of, like it.

WH: So, there are no production reasons for it?

PW: No. Not really. I haven't shot on tape for, since I started actually. I always shoot on film.

WH: How big were the crews on the Tina films?

PW: Small. We had, the cameraman and focus puller and one person on sound. Then me and two assistants, I think.

WH: Do you have an assistant that works with you?

PW: Oh you have to. I didn't have like proper firsts on those. We worked with more of a sort of documentary team, so that my assistant Rachel on those films, I'd done all the research on my own, she'd then spent time for me getting know everybody. That was pretty key. I mean, one of the things which you wouldn't do on a normal film is that the lads, there was three lads in Tina Goes Shopping, where never up. So Rachel had to go and wake them up and get them out of bed, to bring them along… (laughs). It was a job that, you know, normally actors will turn up. But they were always completely exhausted, having been up all night, smoking bongs, or whatever it was.

WH: So they're quite close to their characters?

PW: Yeah, they were. They were very close.

WH: They'd have to be otherwise you'd be asking them to act.

PW: That was very much their life. Bong to bong.

WH: Thinking about the casting what would have happened, why did you go to Leeds?

PW: There was no reason for it. In 1994 I did a film called *Shakespeare on the Estate,* which was shot in Ladywood, Birmingham. It was a film. Well, really we were doing scenes from Shakespeare with people from the estate. It was a film that did quite well. In the course of making the film, I got to know more. Of course, I knew a certain amount from when I was on the social and then working with those girls and so on. But in *Shakespeare on the Estate* we got to know a group of lads, who we befriended but didn't want to be in the film. There was this one day where one of these guys, we were having a chat outside the pub, said, 'You really like your job, don't you' and I said, 'Yeah, I really love it. I look forward to coming to work. It's exciting, it's quite stressful, but it's really interesting.' He said, 'Well, I really like my job.' I was really taken aback and said, 'I thought you didn't have a job?' Then he said, 'I'm

a thief.' He loved being a thief and said, 'If you want anything,' he explained about the shoplifting service, 'You go down town and if you see something you like, make a note of it, come back and tell me. I'll go and pinch it for you, and you can get it off me for 50% of the price.' I'd been seeing these boys coming and going with shopping bags and I thought, 'they do a lot of shopping', but of course, it's what Tina calls 'shopping'.

It was 94 and it was the time of the World Cup. One of the things that they'd done was, by mistake, they'd nicked all these Romanian football shirts, which they couldn't get rid of because everyone on the estate supported Ireland or England. So they were going really cheap, these shirts. That was more kind of speculative nicking. But the kind of nicking-to-order thing really interested me. I thought, 'gosh, this is very organised.' In that case, it was boys that did it. I tried to make a film about alternative economy in South Wales on an estate in the Rhondda Valley. There was a woman called Wendy who was the local Pincher. Everybody knew about 'grifting'. You know, there were jobs, there were legal jobs and there were the 'other' kind of jobs. The dealers were people who had all the power, who everybody admires. The shoplifters are mainly women. There hadn't been any in Birmingham. Wendy would go round and get her orders. She'd set off with her buggy. I remember once saying, 'Well, do you want me to look after the baby, while you go,' and she said, "Oh no, I need the baby. You know this is for hiding the stuff for tucking the things in the pram.' So she'd go off to do her shopping and she'd come back with all these various things, you know for people. But of course I couldn't film it, because I liked Wendy. Although I could have persuaded her to let me film her, actually doing it. Of course she would then have been arrested and thrown into prison. I could understand why people were doing this and that it was, you know, an alternative economy. So it was. The idea of doing it as a drama came out of not being able to do it as a documentary, in away. At that time Peter Dale had just got the job at channel 4 and he'd liked *Shakespeare on the Estate* and a couple of other things that I'd done, so he asked me to come and see him. He asked me what I was interested in doing and I said, 'I want to make a film about the black economy on an estate, with people playing the parts. With the real people acting.' Because Peter hade been a filmmaker himself, and had also attempted to make the same sort of film and come up against this wall, he understood where I was coming from. He said, 'OK, go for it.' Because he was from a documentary background, he allowed me to do it in this very open way.

WH: How do you get a project like this off the ground, because it's quite risky?

PW: At that stage it was a new thing. Peter decided to take a risk, because he thought well I've done films, he knew that I would do it or die in the attempt, that I wouldn't deliberately let him down. I said to him, 'I didn't know if it was going to work,' and he said, 'Oh well, that was alright, I could fail,' which was incredible. And so I made the film and it worked. It then became like another sort of genre that people were doing a lot. But we genuinely had no idea really.

WH: Where you aware of the Dogme approach at that point? That kind of whole thing that was going around with video cameras?

PW: Not really. Or was I? *Breaking The Waves* had happened, hadn't it? You see I'd been working like this before, anyway, because I'd done a version of *Macbeth*

WH: Was this Shakespeare on the Estate?

PW: No, not *Shakespeare on the Estate*, after Shakespeare. *Shakespeare on the Estate* was shot in that way too, which was handheld and all that.

WH: Was that also commercially funded?

PW: That was funded by the BBC. Then I did a version of *Macbeth* on this estate in Birmingham, with a mixture of actors and local people. It was using the text. So it was a full-length version of *Macbeth,* shot in that way too. You know, shot in this sort of documentary way.   So, I mean, I love those Dogme films, but I don't feel it's..

WH: New.

 PW: No. People have done it for a long time. The Italian Neo Realists, *The Battle of Algiers* or Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. You know, it's a way of working that people have always done. You stumble across it in your own way, for whatever reason.

WH: Do the actors ever act? Do they ever become aware that they are actually in a film?

PW: Yeah and it happens sometimes with the trained actors and sometimes you know and it doesn't feel right, and I just think 'oh, I don't believe this.'

WH: What's your strategy for dealing with it?

PW: It varies. Recently I did a film, which really got some actually excruciatingly terrible reviews and some really good ones, called *The Principles of Lust*. That was with mainly actors, although some of the Tina people were in that as well. There were times, if it didn't feel right, that the actors would just get drunk. Then that would be a break. So, it's like, whatever you had to do.

WH: Do you know when they're starting to go that way?

PW: Yeah you always know whether it feels right, and they know as well. It either feels right or it doesn't and if it doesn't you just keep shooting until you find it. And so you have a longer period when you're not lighting and doing all that hitting marks sort of thing. You've got actually more time to shoot, which is just as well, because you have these crap budgets and we've always got these very short shooting schedules. So you either eat up 80% of it, hanging round waiting for lights, or you can do something else.

WH: So were both the Tina films just not lit?

PW: No. It was just the light bulbs thing. For example, the pub scene in *Tina Goes Shopping* was the one-day we had an electrician, because it's a big pub and it was very, very dark. Basically we just got these lights and suspended these paper lanterns so that it gave out this very soft light. Occasionally, I think in *Tina Takes a Break* we used these daylight Kinos.

WH: Oh Yes, was that Kino-Flos?

PW: Kino-Flos, that's right, yeah. Sometimes, because you're shooting up north and although… Actually, both those films were shot in the summer, whereas *Principals of Lust* was shot during the winter in Sheffield. I mean you've got about five minutes of daylight. Even at midday you can't see anything. So Graham would just stick a Kino-Flo at the window, just to boost the light.

WH: I was thinking that you'd have to, because, even though they've got very fast films now, if there's just no light you start to see the grain bubble away.

PW: Yeah, and they do look a bit grainy sometimes. At the end of *Tina Goes Shopping,* when The Don is up the tree, we had to light that, because you're in the woods at night.   Forget it. So we actually had a truck with a huge …

WH: HMI?

PW: Yeah, a huge HMI or two, or something like that. So that was all lit. In *Tina Takes a Break*, the scene at the end, when there's the egg fight and the guy jumps off the roof, we had lights, which were fixed to the streetlights.

WH: So how did you get to know the people on the estate? What did you do, just go to the clubs and hang out?

PW: Yeah. If you're going into places, which are kind of hermetically sealed worlds, where they're not on the way to anywhere, nobody is ever passing through. If people who don't live there are going in, it means that you're either a policeman or an undercover cop, or a social worker, or you're from the social. So actually, you're always the kind of enemy in a way.

WH: So what was your ruse then?

PW: Firstly, you'd go to the shop, to the pub, to the community centre, to any kind of public places where people meet. I turn up and I tell people what I'm doing immediately, because, by the time you've walked in you can be sure there's a rumour going around where people are going, 'There's this woman wondering around and what's she doing?' There'll be a theory about what you are doing, so at least you start off your own rumour straight away saying, 'I'm here to make a film and I'm looking for people to take part in it, and it's going to be about how life really is on an estate.'

WH: Do they think that you're there to exploit them?

PW: Initially, people think that you're a grass. They call it a slip and that you are there to report on things that are happening. So the main thing is to persuade them that you really are there to make a film. Because it sounds so unlikely, it takes a while. Eventually what happens is that, it's very embarrassing at the beginning and horrible, because people don't believe you, they're suspicious. They don't want to talk to you and you feel like a complete

plonker and it's horrible. Then at some point you meet somebody that you like and that you connect with. If you connect with them that means they'll connect with you. On Halton Moor, which was the Tina estate, it was Gwen, the large woman that I met. We just got on, once she liked me. If you like someone it's because you trust them or whatever, once she liked me I was then introduced to her friends, which meant that I was meeting people through her. One of the youth workers, Jim Turner, who's a fantastic guy, liked me and thought I was all right. His instinct was that I wasn't going to stitch people up or anything like that. Again, because Jim was the one who introduced me to Gwen, she was prepared to have an open mind. Eventually, what happens is that you just plug into a network.

WH: I suppose they have to trust you eventually?

PW: Eventually, what happens is that you start to see a lot of illegal things and the police don't turn up immediately afterwards. So you obviously haven't been grassing. So you have to decide, you know, what your line is.

WH: Did the police ever turn up when you were around?

PW: There was one time that I was actually at Gwens and the police chased some kids who'd nicked a bike, or something. One of the houses down the road was on fire. I mean, it was like that all the time. You'd go in and there'd be houses, I mean cars, on the green and on fire. At first it was like, 'whoa look!' you know, 'a burning twork.' After a while, you wouldn't even turn your head. You'd see very small children driving these cars around and everything.

WH: A real battle zone?

PW: Yes, it was. This bike had been dumped just outside Gwen's and they'd run off. We went outside and the police turned up, and everybody was abusing the police. Actually, in that case, the police weren't doing anything. I mean they were genuinely just going to call the fire brigade to put out the fire. They weren't being rude to people or anything. I felt slightly uncomfortable because people were screaming abuse, when really there wasn't any need for it. But there's nothing you can do. So, I just sort of stood there, and that was it. Then there was another time, I remember this really made me feel uncomfortable, when, again I was at Gwen's, I turned up and there were police everywhere, all over the estate. I said, 'What's

happened?' She told me that the boys would nick cars and then they'd drive them round the golf course, which was on the other side of the wood, and cut up the golf course. The police had turned up and they'd chased the boys through the woods into the estate. One of the police had got separated from the others, in a house, and had been battered unconscious. And, you know, they were looking for the lads. So we're talking. There's a knock at the door and a bit of a hurried exchange with her son, and these lads came in with their sort of balaclava type thing. Her son said, 'they need to hide. They're on the run and they need to hide and they hid me when I was on the run.' And she's going, 'I don't want trouble at my doorstep.' He said, 'Well, we've gotta do it.' So then, I'm sitting there, in her house with these guys who'd beaten up this policeman. I'm thinking, God! I hope he's not dead. I'd draw the line at murder, absolutely, or rape. That's where I thought that if I leave and the police come immediately, they're going to think it's me. So I sat there, poor Gwen, for hours with this cup of tea. She must have been dying to get rid of me. Eventually, I went to somebody else's house. Then, fuck me!, these lads turn up there, because they're going from one house to another. So I'm, for the second time….

WH: They followed you around.

PW: Yeah. I felt anxious and then it blew over. But at that point, I remember thinking 'it's a fine line, actually'. That's the only time. It wasn't about him being a policeman or not. It's a human being whose been battered into a coma. That was a problem. I wasn't there to make a judgement about things. It was just a question of, morally, how I felt. Most of this stuff I thought, even with the dealers who were dealing heavy drugs, I thought 'If they were born three miles down the road they'd be a trader in the city.' They're businessmen, this is the business, you know. Anywhere else, they'd be doing some legitimate, probably just as devastating, business, you know. Trading stocks or shares, or whatever. Keeping farmers in Tanzania on a very low wage. I didn't feel that it was incumbent on me to tell. I never did.

WH: Of course at that point, if you had, then the whole thing would have broken down, in terms of trust.

PW: Oh yeah. I would have to go.

WH: You'd have been a hunted person.

PW: That's right. Because, actually people knew where I lived and they had my phone number and everything.

WH: Do you regard yourself as having a technique, and an approach to these films? So every time you approach a film now is there a set approach that you begin with?

PW: Well, with the Tina films, there wasn't any dialogue. So, in each scene I said that people had to get from A to B. But they could do it however they wanted to.

WH: Did you have a treatment or something?

PW: Yeah, well it was a script that was broken down into scenes, because otherwise you can't schedule it. Whether it was inside or out, and where it was set. It said what was going to happen in that scene, what kinds of things people were going to talk about, but it wouldn't indicate exactly what they where going to say. For example, The Don is a really incredibly sharp, clever, funny guy. So that, the first time you meet him and he does his speech about not wanting to be a Concorde pilot, because it would get very boring breaking the sound barrier and everything. That was something that I'd heard him say. I just asked him to say it again. So I knew what he was going to say, exactly, because I knew that he could do it. I wasn't going to see him trying to remember something.

In *The Death of Klinghoffer*, which you haven't seen, but maybe you should have a look at, because actually in many ways I did use the same technique. But in this case, there were Arias that people were singing.   So that in that case, the words are not just nailed down, the exact pitch and timing are absolutely precise. It has to be. Because of the way it's written to be sung, exactly in that pitch at that tempi and so on. So, if you take the singing as a dialogue, it's absolutely nailed down.

WH: Obviously in that instance you're working with highly trained people, so you've gone from, on one hand working with non-actors to….

PW: Yeah, but the singers had never acted on film before. So the thing was. Although they had those things to do, I asked them to be very 'interior' in terms of their characters. I think the performances are incredible and they are filmed performances. You can tell, if we're on a

close-up of somebody. I said, 'If you're not thinking about what you're singing, we will know. So the thought has to be in your head all the time.'

WH: And would that be the same advice you'd be giving to the actors in your Tina films? Would you ever be giving that level of directorial advice?

PW: Yeah. You'd set the scene. You go in and say, 'Well this is what you are feeling and this is what's happening.' You know.

WH: But you never tell them the outcome? You never suggest what they might say, do you? If you took a scene, what knowledge does that actor bring at that point in time? Your advice to them would be 'You're going to have an exchange with so and so…'

PW: Well, in *The Principals of Lust*, actually, there was a script and probably about ninety five percent of the dialogue in the film is exactly as in the script. But I did say that if they wanted to improvise they could. In some cases they did. In some cases, it was better than the script and it's in the film. So I wasn't that precious about what I'd written. But they're actors, they'd look at a page and remember it. But there were sometimes, when they'd say something and we'd all go, that doesn't sound right. Even though I'd written it. It sounded all right in my head. Then we would change it, which again, is the lucky thing when you've written it yourself, that you can mess about and nobody's going to say anything to you, because you're the writer.

So it depends. Some actors, and again I'm saying actors for everybody, love to know everything. They really liked to be talked to a lot, about what their journeys been, and all that. In some cases, people don't. They want you to leave them alone. In some cases, they want you to bully them a bit, or they want you to flirt with them, or whatever. So it slightly depends on each person. In a sense, that's something I learnt from documentary, because it's the same thing. Some people, in order for them to be able to be themselves while they're telling their story, you have to set up different kinds of relationships. You know, it can be jokey, flirty, or slightly strict, or whatever works for that person. Then you have to be, as a director, quite instinctive about what it is you think that person needs.

WH: I guess you've probably come across books like Improv, by Keith Johnsone?

PW: No. I've never actually read a book about improvising.

WH: He talks about accepting and blocking. The key to successful improvisation seems to be in an actor's ability to accept the stimuli provided by the actor. That the moment, as in life, when you start putting up barriers or creating blocks and not offering suggestions, the drama closes down. Do you think that people naturally, in an improvised situation, accept what's going on?

PW: I don't know if I understand what he was talking about. Maybe I'm not that technical in that way. I think that if you create the right space, so that… I'm not improvising towards something, towards something that is going to become a scene, which you will then perform. That is the moment and we're shooting it. If I know what the tone of the scene is, the essence of it, I think what I do, and actors always laugh about this afterwards, is apparently… I don't plan it. For example, there's a scene in *Principles of Lust*, which is kind of banging. Everyone's supposed to be high on E's, or whatever, and we shot it at ten o'clock in the morning. What I do is, go in and yank up this bit of music really loud. I just sort of leap in and start screaming and jumping around and pushing people. Then I get the ADs to do the same thing.

WH: In that mode?

PW: Well, partly. I also think, they think 'oh well she looks like a complete fool, so it's alright for me to let myself go a bit.' So you kind of loosen inhibitions, by being like that yourself. Just winding everybody up until the energy levels are really high, and then you go for it. For example, in *The Death of Klinghoffer* there's a scene where the central couple, a disabled Jewish American and his wife, are preparing to go to bed on the first night of the cruise. They were a little bit anxious and they didn't know each other very well and they had to kiss. They were saying afterwards, 'Oh, that was amazing,' because what happens is, that you go in very quietly and you're sort of whispering and you sit very close to them. You're kind of very gentle and reassuring, and that's the tone of that scene. Then the crew pick up on that and they come and start tiptoeing around. So I think one of things that you'd do is set the tone, in a way. You're making the space in which that thing can happen. I don't like bullying

people, or anything like that. But, if it's a sort of loud scene, I think I do run around, shouting and things, you know.

WH: What I'm curious to know is that, do the actors know what the intended outcome of the scene is? So that they know they're doing a scene with x or y and that by the end of that scene they've got to have reached this point?

PW: Yeah.

WH: They've full cognisance of what they're doing?

PW: Absolutely. For example, in *The Principals of Lust*, Mark Warren, who plays this character Billy, only read the scenes that he was in. We just decided that, because the character he's playing lives in a very different world. So when he saw the final film he was amazed, because he saw all these things that he knew nothing about. This domestic life that was going on, that wasn't to do with his character. That was just something that I did with him, because we just thought it'd be interesting.

WH: So these films are not what you might term 'happenings'?

PW: No. In a sense it's chaos, but it's controlled chaos. With *Tina Goes Shopping* or *Principals of Lust*, or *The Death of Klinghoffer,* they're very close to the scripts. I remember someone being really surprised. I can't remember who it was. I think it might have been Peter Moore, who'd been at Channel 4 before, and he had seen this so called script that I'd written for *Tina Goes Shopping* and said 'It's the script!' So, it's not like anything can happen. In a sense the structure is quite tight. This is what we have to do. This is what's going on. This is the essence of this scene. We have to get from here, to here. But it's how you do it.

WH: Did you structure those stories for a specific narrative effect?

PW: Yeah, in a very conventional way. In a sense, there's a sort of three-act structure. There's the 'set-up', the various things, then you've got the second act and then, at the end, everything is sort of resolved in some way.

WH: Is this something that you do by yourself? Or do you work with other people?

PW: No. I do it by myself. That bit is just a completely, interior, lonely, process.

WH: And how long do you give yourself?

PW: The Tina films were actually written very quickly. The research period had actually been going along for a long, long time, because I'd been making all these films on the estates and hanging out. So, actually, I knew what I'd wanted to do. You know, for me, the first film was about the economy. The second film was about how children are prepared for this life and that it's not helpful to be a very swotty kid, because you are going to be fucking dead in the water. So parents bring up their children in order to give them a chance of surviving and being successful in that environment. That's kind of, what might seem rough and everything. The trigger for that was, I remember one of the women saying to me, if your child runs in crying, saying 'I've just been beaten up on the street,' she said, you just have to push them out of the door saying, 'go and fight." Shut the door and make them go and do it, she said. It breaks your heart and it's hard, but you can't be a victim round here. I thought, 'OK you could see that as being very brutal but there's a sense in which actually they're preparing that child, for them to survive. So that's what interested me in that film. I'd heard this story about these kids who'd nicked this money and gone to Blackpool and hired donkeys for the day.

WH: Are you always looking for the twist in the tale? It's not about a narrative event you're looking for always trying to extract the meaning out of it?

PW: Yes. It's the humanity really. Trying to put yourself in other people's shoes. In *The Death of Klinghoffer*, which has had some completely fabulous reviews, I've also been attacked. People were saying, 'It's an apology for terrorism,' or I don't know what. It was an attempt to understand, because of what happened. It's based on a real event, which is the hijacking of the Achille Lauro back in 1985. This disabled Jewish American is shot and thrown overboard. Well, I mean, that is a completely brutal, pointless, cruel, inexcusable act. You know, to kill somebody in a wheel chair and throw them overboard. But the whole endeavour was to say, 'OK, how does somebody arrive at this point? How does somebody arrive at the point where they go into a kind of coffee bar in Tel-Aviv and blow themselves up, with a whole load of other people who just happen to be drinking milkshakes? How does that happen? How does somebody, who hasn't been born as a psychopath, and there are very

few psychopaths in the world, how do people find themselves justifying doing that kind of thing?' I'm interested in that. Something has gone very wrong, which is preparing generations of young men who want to kill themselves. Something's wrong. It isn't to do with this ridiculous American idea of hunting down individuals and killing them and everything's going to be all right. You know, because it isn't.

WH: Do you imagine that you might return to that as a theme again?

PW: Well, one of the two films I'm writing is a genre heist movie. I was trying to see whether I could do something lighter and more kind of plotty, about a group of magicians who kind of pull off this casino. So I've spent a long time hanging round with magicians in casinos. The research has been great, but it's been very hard to write the script. The other one is set in Bradford and it's more like Tina. I mean, it will be a feature film, but actually I want her to be in it. So there's a White family and an Asian family and I spent a long time in the autumn hanging around thirteen and fourteen year olds. You think you're going to go and find all these fundamentalist kids. Actually, it was very funny.

WH: So you'd never go into a production with a day-by-day schedule that says 'today we're going to do shots 50-76?

PW: What I can never imagine myself doing, is working out everything, including shots and storyboards and all of that. Then the shoot is a process, simply nailing down these things that you've planned. I'd die of boredom. I couldn't do it. I couldn't get out of bed to do that. So that, although the level of improvisation, whether it's just the use of handheld cameras, and following the actors and not having marks, or whether it's just having the dialogue or whatever pinned down. Or whether it's, you know, everything is improvised. I mean it just varies. I'm doing a thing in 2006, in Margate, where we want to recreate The Book of Exodus using the entire population to play the Egyptians and the Israelites.

WH: Who's in this? Will it be people from the estates?

PW: Well, yeah, I'm hoping that. There are forty thousand people in Margate, I don't know how many of them will want to play, hopefully quite a lot of them. You know there are asylum seekers and some old people and unemployed people, who are all, sort of, mutually

suspicious of each other. So I thought it'd be really fun. It starts off with the Egyptians complaining about Jews: 'there are so many of them and they are having too many children,' and 'there's going to be more of them than us,' and 'they're taking our jobs.'

WH: Have you got funding in place for that?

PW: Yeah, pretty much. That'll obviously be totally improvised and around a core story, you know from the Old Testament. The Casino movie, I would imagine, will be more like *Principles of Lust,* where I'm writing all the dialogue and the voice over. It may change a little bit, but probably not that much. I'll want to have cast the magicians and so on, you know, and the magic has to be right and all that. The Bradford film, the sort of Tina film, will be done as a movie. I imagine it will be, because there are a lot of the people in it, people who are thirteen or fourteen and are not actors, it will be much more improvised. So, it sort of varies. It has to be. I have to keep my energy levels up by being interested.

WH: How do you do that? What fuels you?

PW: Well, it's not knowing. The feeling that you might discover something new that day, and that you always do. You have to prepare. I know what the essence of the scene is and what I have to get. But, if I know too much, I just think, 'how would I be interested in that.' I'd just feel like my feet were nailed to the floor. I want to go out and I want things to happen. I want people to surprise me, so I prefer to leave it open.

WH: Many thanks Penny.

Word Count: 11,677

Suggested Approach to Creating Character

> "Character is a point of view – it is the way we look at the world."
>
> (Syd Field, *Screenwriters Workbook*, 1982:32)

Before commencing the training sessions and rehearsals, the cast are invited to make a list of all the people they know. The only requirement being that the people on the list should be the same sex and within approximately five years of the actors playing age. Individually, the actors will discuss the list of people with the director, before settling upon an individual for further development. [49]

Over a number of weeks the actors will be asked to create a character biography for their chosen character. For this part of the exercise the actor will make notes and gather information that can be compiled within a simple "scrap book". Actors will be encouraged to keep a diary in the voice of their character. This diary will comment and offer opinion on television programmes, videos, books, newspapers, radio stations, and websites that the character regularly accesses. The actors must not invent this information but draw on the real world. Actors will be expected to consolidate this research to a point that within an interview situation they should be able to respond to a variety of areas about the character's life from the following check list:

Character Check List

1. What is your character's name? How do they feel about their name? What is the meaning or significance of this name?
2. What is character's birthday? What does your character feel about their age?
3. Does you character have an accent?

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[49] The first paragraph has borrowed from Mike Leigh's approach as documented in Clements, P. (1986: page no), *The Improvised Play: The Work of Mike Leigh*, London: Methuen.

4. What is your character's favourite expression, where does it come from?

5. What is your character's normal dress sense? What do they most like to wear, what do they least like to wear?

Formative

6. Where was your character born?

7. Where did your character grow up, did they stay in one place or move around – if so where?

8. Education: Where did your character go to school? What subjects did they like and hate? Who was your character's best school friend – what made them stand out from other friends? Who did your character most dislike – why?

9. Occupations: How does your character feel about their current job? What other jobs has your character taken.

10. Music: Identify the character's favourite groups and music (top twenty CD's to be taken to a desert island). Define what your character listens for in their music.

11. Literature: What books have made the most impression on your character – why? Identify the book that your character would take to a desert island – what do they think they get from the text?

12. Television & Films: list your character's top twenty films. How often do they go to the cinema?

13. What other hobbies does your character have? Do they go to any clubs or associations?

Family & Friends

14. Identify your character's family members.

15. Describe your character's relationship with their parents

16. Describe your character's relationships with their siblings, if any.

17. Describe and identify your character's lovers and nature of the relationships that they have had with them.

18. What qualities does your character look for in a friend?

19. How does your character physically express tension?

Attitudes

20. What does your character feel about them self? Are they life's winners or losers?

21. What are the hidden aspects of your character's personality? What does your character keep hidden from others?

22. Identify the frustrations and major disappointments in your character's life.

23. What nicknames have others given to the character? What do they mean?

24. Does your character have any obsessions- if so what?

25. Identify your character's inhibitions

26. Identify your character's phobias and prejudices.

27. What is the political persuasion of your character, why? How will they vote at the next election?

Environment

28. Where does your character live (bed-sit, flat, house, neighbourhood, town or city). How does this environment affect your character?

29. Where does your character want to live?

BLOOD OFFERING
Provisional Outline

1. EXT. CEMETARY. DAY
   MINA photographs LILITH in the cemetery. (Aim of the scene is to establish characters relationship, the fact that Mina is engaged in a photographic project for college)

2. INT. LILITH'S FAMILY HOME. DAY
   MUM prepares Sunday Lunch. She has a new boyfriend in tow and is 'furious' when LILITH returns late and full of 'attitude'. LILITH introduces herself as being a screwed-up adolescent on account of her poor upbringing. (Establishes that Mother and daughter are clearly at war).

3. INT. LILITH'S BEDROOM.NIGHT
   LILITH puts on music and reads *The Satanic Bible.*

4. INT. MINA'S BEDROOM. NIGHT
   MINA is 'photo shopping' images of LILITH

5. INT. COLLEGE. DAY
   LILITH is late for class the lecturer is obviously displeased. Following the class they have a tutorial in which the lecturer reveals her concerns.

6. INT. BOOKSHOP. LATE AFTERNOON
   Alternative bookshop, specialising in ritual magic and witchcraft. LILITH is browsing titles. MIRCALLA, 28, is also browsing titles and strikes up a conversation saying that she read book when she was 14 and was similarly intrigued.

7. INT. CAFÉ. DAY
   MIRCALLA and LILITH meet in an alternative café and talk intensively. LILITH starts talking passionately about the Satanic Bible and LaVey's ideology and reveals that she wants to be baptised. MIRCALLA reveals she knows anyone who can perform the service.

8. EXT. CEMETARY. DAY
   MINA takes photographs of LILITH wearing angel wings. LILITH tells MINA about

her encounter with MIRCALLA and proposed baptism. MINA is concerned.

9. <u>INT. LILITH'S HOUSE. DAY</u>
   LILITH has returned home after an 'all nighter'. Her mother waits up and is seething. An argument ensues. LILITH walks out.

10. <u>EXT.CEMETARY.DUSK</u>
    LILITH phones MINA and leaves a message on her answerphone, asking if she can stay the night. There is no reply so she phones MIRCALLA.

11. <u>INT. MIRCALLA'S PAD. NIGHT</u>
    LILITH AND MIRCALLA get progressively drunk, which leads to a sexual encounter and culminates in a blood exchange – the pact.

12. <u>INT. COLLEGE. DAY</u>
    The Exhibition. LILITH meets MINA at the end of year show and discusses weekend trip to Whitby Festival.

ROAD TRIP TO WHITBY

13. <u>INT. CAMPER. NIGHT</u>
    Girls are having a fun time. They pick up a hitchhiker called FRANK.

14. WHITBY EXPERIENCE - MONTAGE
    LILITH takes FRANK to *The Dracula Experience*. MINA takes FRANK for walk around graveyard. MINA reads extracts from Dracula in voice over. I've been having dreams you were in these dreams that involved the death of a boy.

15. JOURNEY HOME
    VW breaks down. MIRCALLA phones friend who owns the van. He will drive out to meet them. They will have to wait for a few hours. Meanwhile, FRANK and LILITH go off to find some cigarettes and drink.

16. INT. HUT. AFTERNOON
    FRANK and LILITH get drunk and end up having sex in a Beach Hut. Playing around LILITH accidentally cuts into FRANK'S artery.

17. EXT. VAN. NIGHT.
   LILITH runs back to the van to find help. MIRCALLA returns to the hut with petrol and sets light to the hut.

JOURNEY HOME

18. INT. BATHROOM. DAY
   LILITH removes her Goth identity.

19. INT. WORK. DAY
   LILITH meets her mother for lunch. She learns that mum's boyfriend has gone off. MUM asks if she wants to move back in.

20. INT. LILITH'S BEDROOM. NIGHT
   Lilith's Dream: She is being chased by an unseen winged beast across open fields.

21. INT. CAFÉ. DAY
   LILITH tells MINA about her nightmares.

22. INT. SPIRITUALIST. NIGHT
   LILITH & MINA visit occult specialist, who suggests that LILITH should have a new start.

23. INT. CATHOLIC CHURCH.DAY
   LILITH visits church and speaks to priest in the confessional. She tells him about her 'friend'.

24. INT. MIRCALLA'S FLAT. DAY
   LILITH confronts MICALLA and tells her of her dreams. MIRCALLA says her friend will arrange a purification ritual.   LILITH says that she is moving on. MIRCALLA gives LILITH her penknife.

Birdman Script

By

Will Howe

(based on David Almond's My Dad's A Birdman)

TITLE SEQUENCE: Close Up of dad's hands weaving, sticking feathers.

FADE OUT

1   EXT. CROWS HOUSE - EARLY MORNING   1

It is early morning and the sun is still low on the horizon. Lizzie exits the house and takes a bicycle that is leaning against the wall. She goes down the path and through the gate.

2   EXT. LARK LANE - EARLY MORNING   2

Lizzie closes the gate behind her and sets off down the coast road.

MIX TO

3   EXT. TYNEMOUTH PROMENADE - EARLY MORNING   3

Lizzie cycles along the North Shields promenade. The camera follows for a while and allows Lizzie to leave the frame as she pedals off into the distance. The camera pans across the estuary taking in the mouth of the river Tyne, the outer harbour walls and red light house situated on the south bank of the river.

4   INT. NEWSAGENTS - EARLY MORNING   4

CU on a radio, we hear the shipping news. Track back to reveal a shop keeper marking up the newspapers.

5   EXT. PROMENADE - EARLY MORNING   5

Low angle, showing the promenade extending back into the horizon. The distant figure of Lizzie can be seen approaching at great speed. In the foreground a Polaroid camera can be seen hanging from the iron railings. Lizzie cycles through the frame and screeches to a halt. She doubles back into frame and picks up the camera. She pauses and studies the camera. She looks through the camera.

POV as Lizzie scans the land and seascapes, framing upon the statue of Admiral Collingwood.

                    LIZZIE
          Smile, Admiral. Go on, say
          cheese, you know you want to.

Lizzie tries to take a picture of Admiral Collingwood but the camera doesn't appear to work. She puts the camera away and then continues her journey.

6   EXT. BILLBOARD - EARLY MORNING   6

The camera pans across the stationary fun-fair amusements
to a large advertising hoarding on the sea front. An old
van, supporting a number of wooden ladders attached to the
roof, pulls up in front of the billboard. Two young men get
out of the van and proceed to untie the ladders from the
roof of the van. They open the back door of the van and
rolls upon rolls of posters tumble out. Lizzie cycles by.

7   EXT. GUEST HOUSE - EARLY MORNING   7

Establishing shot of large faded guest house. Looking a
little dilapidated: peeling paint work, shabby net
curtains, seedlings sprouting from gutters etc... the
establishment clearly needs some remedial maintenance.

                                          CUT TO

8   INT. MR. POOP'S GUEST ROOM - EARLY MORNING   8

CU tea's maid on a bedside table. The light comes on and
the teas maid starts to work it's magic. The camera pulls
back as Mr. Poop sits up in bed and puts on his glasses.

9   EXT. NEWSAGENTS - EARLY MORNING   9

Lizzie arrives at a small local newsagents. She gets off
her bike and leans in against the wall.

10   INT. NEWSAGENTS - EARLY MORNING   10

Lizzie jubilantly enters the shop and Mr. Bradshaw looks up
and smiles.

                    MR. BRADSHAW
          Hello Lizzie.

                    LIZZIE
          Morning Mr. Bradshaw.

                    MR BRADSHAW
          We're cutting it a bit fine this
          morning, aren't we?

                    LIZZIE
          Sorry I'm late. I got a little
          distracted. In fact, I found this
          on the front.

Lizzie hands Mr. Bradshaw the camera.

              MR. BRADSHAW
     That's a fine looking camera.
     It's a Polaroid. An instant
     camera.. you know it produces
     your photo's right after you've
     taken them. Expensive mind.

              LIZZIE
     Does it work? I tried to take a
     photo but...

Mr Bradshaw has a fiddle with the back.

              MR. BRADSHAW
     Well let's see. The film goes
     there.. Hmm.. You point, click
     this trigger and then... well
     after you've taken a photo you
     need to pull this tab and the
     picture comes out here. Look one
     seems to be stuck.

Mr. Bradshaw pulls out a photo. He peels off the backing
paper and hands the photo to Lizzie. Within seconds a
picture of a beautiful lady, wearing a butterfly wings
costume, forms before her eyes.

              LIZZIE
     Wow.

              MR. BRADSHAW
     A fine looking lady.

Mr. Bradshaw waves it dry.

              LIZZIE
     D'you think I could keep the
     camera?

              MR. BRADSHAW
     Well..I expect it'll be sorely
     missed by it's owner.

              LIZZIE
     I suppose it will.

Mr. Bradshaw hands the camera back to lizzie.

              MR. BRADSHAW

     I could put a notice on our
     board.

                        LIZZIE

                What if I pop into the police
                station, after school.

                        MR. BRADSHAW
                Yes, that's an idea. Well, we
                must be getting along. Our
                customers will expect their
                morning news.

Mr. Bradshaw hands Lizzie her delivery bag.

                        MR. BRADSHAW (CONT'D)
                Cherio.

                        LIZZIE
                Bye, Mr. Bradshaw.

Lizzie exits the shop.

11   INT. MR. POOP'S GUEST ROOM - EARLY MORNING   11

        Mr. Poop stands in front of the mirror and adjusts the tie
        of his strange looking outfit.

12   EXT. STREETS - EARLY MORNING   12

        We see Lizzie delivering papers in a row of terraced
        houses.

13   EXT. GUEST HOUSE - EARLY MORNING   13

        Lizzie delivers a range of different papers to the guest
        house.

14   INT. BREAKFAST ROOM - EARLY MORNING   14

        Mr. Poop enters the breakfast room and takes a table near
        the window. The camera pulls back and reveals an elegant
        woman sitting at another table, we recognize her as the
        woman in the photograph. The lady looks up. Mr. Poop smiles
        and nods. The lady reciprocates. Mr Poop adjusts himself
        and unfolds his napkin. The landlady enters the room and
        places a large cooked breakfast in front of him.

15   INT. GUEST HOUSE LOBBY - EARLY MORNING   15

The landlady picks up the papers. She sorts them places
them in a pile and takes out a copy of Le Monde and The
Journal.

16   INT. BREAKFAST ROOM - EARLY MORNING   16

The landlady re-enters the breakfast room and places the
newspapers on the guests tables.

17   EXT. CROWS HOUSE - EARLY MORNING   17

A gentle breeze blows. Colourful plastic windmills, planted
in flower pots, whir round and round. Wind chimes, hanging
at the back door, ripple and play their dulcet tones. In
the garden various Heath Robinson contraptions mechanically
rotate and make interconnected kinetic movements in the
morning breeze. Seagulls flap in and out of the garden.

18   INT. JACKIE'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING   18

Sun streams through the partially closed curtains. In the
half-light we can make out the form of a very messy
bedroom. Clothes are strewn everywhere. Piles of books are
precariously stacked. On the shelves, model aeroplanes
gather dust whilst on the wall there are big posters
showing the birds of Great Britain. The camera tilts down
to reveal Jackie fast asleep.

19   DREAM SEQUENCE   19

Animated doodle of man running flapping wings, jumping and
flying.

20   EXT. STREETS - EARLY MORNING   20

Lizzie delivering papers, tilt down to bicycle wheel.

21   EXT. STREET - EARLY MORNING   21

CU on bicycle wheel, pull back to Mr Poop as he sets off
down the street on his bicycle.

22   EXT. BILLBOARD - EARLY MORNING   22

          The poster men have been at work. Lizzie cycles by, she
          pauses to take a photograph, just as a strip of the poster
          falls down.

23   INT. JACKIE'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING   23

          Dad asleep.

24   INT. KITCHEN - EARLY MORNING   24

          Lizzie enters house calls up to dad. She fills the kettle
          and puts bread into the toaster. She picks up a saucepan
          and wooden spoon.

25   DREAM SEQUENCE   25

          Animated doodle of man flying (dad) he flies off the screen
          and is chased back onto the screen with a load of people in
          their flying machines. He falls from the sky.

26   INT. HALLWAY - EARLY MORNING   26

          Lizzie comes to the foot of the stairs, looking up, she
          bangs a wooden spoon against a saucepan and bellows out.

                         LIZZIE
                Dad! Daddy! (Beat) dad! Time to
                get up! If you don't get up now,
                I'll come up there...

          Deliberately climbing stairs to make a maximum noise.

                         LIZZIE (CONT'D)
                I'm on me way!

          Pause we hear a grunt and groan then nothing.

                         LIZZIE (CONT'D)
                I'll count to five! One, Two..Two
                and a half..daddy!

                         JACKIE
                (Muffled shout) Oriyt, Lizzie!
                Oriyt!

          Jackie appears in a scruffy dressing gown and holey
          slippers, his hair all wild and face all hairy.

                    LIZZIE
          Downstairs now. And don't look at
          me like that.

                    JACKIE
          No, Lizzie.

27   INT. KITCHEN - EARLY MORNING   27

Lizzie pours hot water into the teapot. Jackie sits at the
kitchen table. The toaster pops up. She straightens the
dressing gown on his shoulders.

                    LIZZIE
          Look at the state of you. What on
          earth have you been doing up
          there?

                    JACKIE
          Been dreaming.

                    LIZZIE
          Dreaming! What a man. Now sit at
          the table. Sit up straight man.

                    JACKIE
          Yes, Lizzie.

Jackie sits on the edge of the chair, eyes shining and
excited. Lizzie plays mother and pours a mug of tea.

                    LIZZIE
          Come on, drink this and eat your
          toast.

He nibbles at a corner of the toast, not making any real
attempt at eating it. Lizzie watches him and monitors his
eating

                    LIZZIE (CONT'D)
          Eat it properly, dad.

Jackie takes a bigger bite.

                    LIZZIE (CONT'D)
          And chew it.. and swallow it,
          Dad.

                    JACKIE
          Yes, Lizzie.

He opens his mouth for Lizzie to look inside.

                    JACKIE (CONT'D)
          All gone. See?

Lizzie clicks her tongue.

                    LIZZIE
          Now you're being silly...

She smooths his hair down and brushes it. Straightens the
collar of his pyjama jacket and feels the thick stubble on
his chin.

                    LIZZIE (CONT'D)
          You've got to look after
          yourself. You can't go on the way
          you are. Can you?

                    JACKIE
          No, Lizzie.

                    LIZZIE
          I want you to have a shower and a
          shave today and to get properly
          dressed.

                    JACKIE
          Yes, Lizzie

                    LIZZIE
          Good. And what plans have you got
          today?

                    JACKIE
          I'm going to fly, Lizzie. Just
          like a bird. I'm going to fly.

                    LIZZIE
          Are you now?

                    JACKIE
          Yes I am. And I'm going to enter
          the competition.

                    LIZZIE
          Competition, what competition?

                    JACKIE
          The human bird competition, of
          course! You must have heard about
          it? The first person to fly 50
          meters across the river wins ten
          thousand pounds. Imagine that.
          Think what we could do with ten
          thousand pounds. I'm going to
          win and I'm going to make me mark
          at last!

Jackie stands up and holds his arms out straight and flaps
them.

                    JACKIE (CONT'D)
               Are me feet off the floor? Are
               they?

He runs off in the direction of the sitting room and flaps
his arms. Lizzie runs off after him.

                    LIZZIE
               Oh, dad. Don't be silly.

28   INT. SITTING ROOM – EARLY MORNING   28

Lizzie runs around the room and catches up with him,
grabbing his dressing gown to slow him down.

                    LIZZIE
               OK. Mebbe you are going to fly
               like a bird, but make sure you
               get some fresh air and get a good
               lunch inside you. OK

                    JACKIE
               OK, Lizzie.

He starts flapping his arms again and chuckles.

                    LIZZIE
               What am I going to do with you?

                    JACKIE
               Don't know, Lizzie.

                    LIZZIE
               I don't know if I should leave
               you on your own.

Lizzie goes and gets her coat from the hallway.

                    JACKIE
               Course you should. You've got to
               go to school and do your sums and
               your spellings.

Lizzie re-enters the sitting room and crosses to dad. They
kiss and hug each other.

                    LIZZIE
               Hmmm.... Now give me a kiss, bye-
               bye, and remember...

                    JACKIE
               Yes, Lizzie. I'll remember. Wash.
               Shave. Get a good lunch.
                         (MORE)

                         JACKIE (CONT'D)
                    Get lots of fresh air. Then I can
                    practice me flying!

Lizzie stares at Jackie in disbelief.

                         LIZZIE
                    Dad.

29   INT. HALLWAY - EARLY MORNING   29

       Lizzie opens the door and steps hesitantly into the porch.

                         JACKIE
                    Go on. You haven't got a thing to
                    worry about. Off you go to your
                    lovely school.

                         JACKIE (CONT'D)
                    Bye-bye

                         LIZZIE
                    Bye dad.

30   EXT. FRONT PATH - MORNING   30

       Lizzie picks up her bike and rushes off down the garden
       path. Going through the gate she turns and takes one last
       look at dad before moving off.

                         JACKIE
                    Go on. I'm fine.

31   EXT. PORCH - MORNING   31

       Jackie waves until Lizzie's out of sight. He closes the
       door and runs into the hallway.

32   EXT. LARK LANE - MORNING   32

       We see a close shot of a bicycle wheel trundling along the
       street; it squeaks and appears to be slightly unstable. We
       pull back to reveal Mr. Poop. As he pedals up the steep
       hill at the bottom of Lark Lane, Mr. Poop bellows through
       the megaphone slung over his shoulder...

                         MR. POOP (AMPLIFIED VOICE)
                    Entries for the human bird
                    competition! All entries for The
                    Great Northern Birdman
                    Competition!

33   INT. HALL - MORNING   33

          Jackie runs through the house flapping his imaginary wings
          giggling. He stops at the hallway mirror, looks at
          himself, pleased as punch.

                         JACKIE
                    Tweet tweet.

          Sticks his tongue out to reveal a piece of toast and spits
          it into the drawer.

                         JACKIE (CONT'D)
                    Tweet tweet, Tweet tweet.

          A fly buzzes past him. He picks up an old newspaper.

                         JACKIE (CONT'D)
                    Yum, yum.

          Jackie runs off after it. Swatting the fly as he runs
          through the house.

34   EXT. BILLBOARD - MORNING   34

          A sheet of the poster is blown across the beach. One of the
          poster men runs after it. Lizzie enters frame and pauses to
          see the man chasing the poster across the beech. She takes
          the camera out of her school bag. Just as he gets very near
          a gust of wind blows it into sea. Click! Lizzie takes a
          photo.

35   EXT. SCHOOL - MORNING   35

          Lizzie arrives and peers through school railings just as
          the children start lining up. She stares and watches the
          mourning routine: the head teacher shouting, the school
          bell and finally everyone trooping into class. Lizzie
          stares blankly, turns and leaves.

36   EXT. PIER - MORNING   36

          Lizzie cycles swiftly down the arm of the pier, heading
          towards the bright red light house situated at the end of
          the promontory. She dismounts her bike and leans it against
          the spiral wrought iron staircase. Lizzie looks through
          the Polaroid camera paning the landscape and looking for a
          pleasing composition.

37   INT. HALL - MORNING   37

There is a stand off. Jackie sits at the foot of the
stairs. The fly hangs upside down on the ceiling. Jackie
looks up longingly at it.

                    JACKIE
          Tweet, tweet. I'll get you, you
          little devil. Come on down and
          I'll gobble you up.

Post drops through the letter flap. Jackie's attention is
drawn to the floor. He notices something black and shiny
scuttle across the white and brown envelopes. He crouches
down in the corner of the room and starts crawling about
beside the skirting board. He picks up a paint scrapper and
scratches at the gap between skirting board and floor.
Eventually he scratches out a little black beetle. He holds
it in the palm of his hand and watches, as it tries to
escape. He picks the bug up and pops it into his mouth.

                    JACKIE (CONT'D)
          Yum, yum! What good's toast to a
          man like me? A man like me needs
          bugs and flies and centipedes.

Jackie smacks his lips and sighs with joy. He flaps his
arms and 'flies' over to the sitting room window and gazes
out into the garden.

38   INT. SITTING ROOM - MORNING   38

Jackie stands gazing vacantly out towards the garden.

                    JACKIE
          A man like me needs worms! Look
          out, little slimy worms! Yum yum!
          I'll soon be coming out to get
          you! If only she knew. If only
          lovely Lizzie knew.

Jackie reaches into his dressing-gown pocket and takes out
a key.

39   EXT. GARDEN - MORNING   39

Dad crosses the garden towards the shed. He puts the key in
the lock.

40   INT. SHED - MORNING   40

        CU dad's hands weaving, sticking feathers.

                                                      FADE OUT

41   EXT. FRONT PATH - AFTERNOON   41

        Lizzie pushes her bike up the garden path. She wheels the
        bike down the side of the house and walks to the front
        door.

42   INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON   42

        Jackie shoves the breakfast things off the table.

43   EXT. FRONT DOOR - AFTERNOON   43

        Lizzie takes her keys out of her pocket, just as she hears
        the CRASH from within. Visibly panicked, Lizzie peers
        through the letter flap.

                         LIZZIE
                Dad?...Dad!

        Lizzie opens the door and rushes into the house.

44   INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON   44

        Lizzie runs in to the kitchen to see dad climbing onto the
        table.

                         LIZZIE
                No dad! No!

                         JACKIE
                One, two!

                         LIZZIE
                Dad! No!

                         JACKIE
                Three!

        Lizzie runs forward waving her arms.

                    LIZZIE
          Dad stop!

Too late. Jackie jumps towards the ceiling and crashes down
onto the floor, landing on his back.

                    JACKIE
          Ow! Ouch, me back! Aagh, me knee!
          Ow, me head!

                    LIZZIE
          Man! You'll kill yourself!

                    JACKIE
          I nearly did it, Lizzie! I was
          nearly away that time! Did you
          see us? Me feet were nearly off
          the ground.

                    LIZZIE
          You could break your back man.

                    JACKIE
          Break me back! Don't be daft!
          Anyhow. D'you like me wings,
          Lizzie? I've been keeping them a
          secret. They were going to be a
          big surprise for you.

Lizzie touches and sniffs the wings. Lizzie inspects the
wings more closely, touching to explore the different
textures and colours of the feathers.

                    LIZZIE
          Is this a blackbird's?

                    JACKIE
          Aye, Lizzie, it is.

Dad takes of the wings.

                    LIZZIE
          And is this a pigeon's feather?

Jackie nods and point to another feather

                    LIZZIE (CONT'D)
          This one's a thrush and here's a
          magpie.

                    JACKIE
          Very good. And look, here's a
          Linnet, a Chiffchaff and this
          beauty is from a Jenny Wren.

                    LIZZIE
          Wow, look how big that Crow
          feather is..

                    JACKIE
          ..and these Seagull feathers are
          very strong and light.

                    LIZZIE
          They're lovely dad.

                    JACKIE
          They're all from the garden. It's
          amazing what you'll find lying
          under the tree. Dropped feathers
          everywhere.

                    LIZZIE
          You're so clever. But you're
          silly as well, dad. A man can't
          fly just by putting feathers on.

                    JACKIE
          Yes he can! It's a matter of
          getting the jumping and flapping
          right. Believe in it, and off you
          go.

                    LIZZIE
          Hey you daft man, give us your
          hand.

     Lizzie gives Jackie a hand in getting up.

                                        FADE OUT

45   EXT. BEACH - MORNING   45

     Lizzie wander along the beach searching through the
     driftwood and debris. She finds feather after feather and
     starts collecting them in a bag. Seagulls peck at old food
     in bins and on the beach, including the remains of fish and
     chips super.

47   EXT. LARK ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON   47

     Mr Poop calls out for more entries.

48   EXT. FRONT DOOR - LATE AFTERNOON   48

          Dad stands in the doorway waving at Mr. Poop. Lizzie stands
          a little behind dad looking somewhat uncertain.

                              MR. POOP
                    Any more entries for...

                              JACKIE
                    Aye! In here, Mr. Poop!

                              MR. POOP
                    But I've got you already, Mr.
                    Crow

                              JACKIE
                    It's not me. It's this young'n
                    here.

          Dad steps aside and nudges Lizzie forward

                              MR. POOP
                    Aha! Isn't she rather young for
                    such a dangerous adventure?

                              JACKIE
                    I'll look after her. Birds is
                    best in the world at looking
                    after their little'ns

                              MR. POOP
                    Hmmmmm?

49   INT. SITTING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON   49

          Jackie leads Mr. Poop inside. Narrowing his eyes and
          looking Lizzie up and down, Mr. Poop shakes his head and
          clicks his tongue in a disapproving way.

                              JACKIE
                    She's strong. She's brave. She's
                    the bravest girl in the whole
                    world. Everybody says so, don't
                    they Lizzie?

                              MR. POOP
                    Do they now?

          Lizzie shrugs her shoulders

                              LIZZIE
                    Sometimes.

                              MR. POOP
                    Good girl. Name?

         LIZZIE
     Elizabeth.

         MR. POOP
     Eliz-a-beth. Elizabeth what?

         JACKIE
     Elizabeth crow!

         LIZZIE
     Elizabeth what?

         JACKIE
     Crow. Caw caw!

         MR. POOP
     Are you sure?

         JACKIE
     Aye. Isn't it, Lizzie?

         LIZZIE
     Ye-es. Caw caw! Caw caw!

         MR. POOP
     Occupation?

Lizzie shrugs her shoulders.

         LIZZIE
     Just girl, I suppose. I'm a
     schoolgirl.

         JACKIE
     No. You're more than that! You're
     a bird-girl. I'm a birdman. She's
     a birdgirl. It's in the family.

Mr. Poop writes this down.

         MR. POOP
     Method of propulsion?

         JACKIE
     It'll be wings and faith and a
     beak and crest. Show him, Lizzie.

Lizzie picks up a beak and crest and puts them on.

         JACKIE (CONT'D)
     You'll not have seen nowt like
     that, have you? And we'll have
     tail feathers, just like a proper
     bird. They're Lizzie's idea.
     She's a method of propulsion
     genius!

Mr. Poop wanders around the living room inspecting Jackie
and Lizzie.

                    MR. POOP
          Hmmm. Hmmmmmmmmmm. Every day
          there's more of them. There's a
          long jump champion on a ship from
          madagascar. There's a pole-
          vaulter coming from smolensk.
          There's a trapeze girl from
          malta, a cartwheeler from cuba,
          and seven whirling dervishes from
          tashkent. There's loopers and
          whoopers and swoopers and
          hoopers. There's a fella with a
          million pink elastic bands.
          There's gliders and slings and
          ten-foot crossbows and...

                    JACKIE
          And there's them like us with
          wings!

                    MR. POOP
          There is. Sadly, there is.

Mr. Poop holds out the clipboard and a pencil.

                    MR. POOP (CONT'D)
          The river is very wet at this
          time of year, Miss Crow. Sign
          here. And here. And also here.

Lizzie smiles and signs away. She hands the clipboard back
to Mr. Poop, who meticulously inspects the form for it's
accuracy.

                    MR. POOP (CONT'D)
          Entry accepted! Do you have
          water wings, miss crow?

                    JACKIE
          Water wings! Go on, Mr. Poop, off
          you go.

Mr. Poop stands in the doorway ready to go, he turns back
at Lizzie and Jackie.

                    MR. POOP
          See you Sunday! Take-off is at
          Midday! Don't be late we only
          have one hour.

They stand watching Mr. Poop waddle down the pathway.

                    LIZZIE
          Why only one hour?

                              JACKIE
                    It's high tide love, we can only
                    make our jump at high tide.

With great excitement, Jackie closes the door and turns to
Lizzie.

                              JACKIE (CONT'D)
                    Birdman and Birdgirl. We'll be
                    the greatest fliers the world has
                    ever seen. Yahoo!

Jackie and Lizzie start running round the sitting room.

                              JACKIE (CONT'D)
                    I'll let you win, Lizzie.

                              LIZZIE
                    Eh?

                              JACKIE
                    I will. I'll let you win. Just at
                    the end I'll slow down and you
                    can overtake me. You can swoop
                    right past me and across the
                    line. Yeah! Birdgirl Lizzie Crow!
                    Give that lass ten thousand
                    pounds!

                              LIZZIE
                    Dad, you won't need to. I'll be
                    collecting me prize whilst your
                    still at the starting line.

Jackie and Lizzie speed off into the house.

50   EXT. BILLBOARD - LATE AFTERNONN   50

          The men have completed hanging the poster. It's upside down
          Pull back to reveal poster rotate camera so the picture is
          the right way up. Jackie and Lizzie draw up on bikes in
          front of poster looking for action.

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

This fax gives a sense of tone of direction, permission for the actors to relax and take the material in the direction they want, drawing on their own experiences where appropriate. The document highlights the essential information to impart.

Instructions for actors appearing in The Blair Witch Project

'TO: JIM KING   301-XXX-XXXX

FROM: ED SANCHEZ

Welcome to the Blair Witch Project. We appreciate your involvement in the production and hope that the shoot will be as fun and hassle-free for you as possible.

Included are directions to the location as well as any character descriptions and backgrounds you will need for your performance.

Before you read the information provided, please make sure you understand the basics of this film. I am looking for completely natural performances. Please, <u>do not act</u>! Also, no fake accents. Just talk in your normal voice. The filmmakers will be talking to you as if you were just normal people. Act like you would if this actually happened to you in real life.

It's okay to look at the camera.

It's okay to be nervous.

It's okay to ask them questions about what they are doing.

It's okay to mess up.

It's okay to forget details in your profiles.

It's okay to make things up as long as they don't mess withC the facts in your profile.

It's okay to cuss.

It's okay to laugh.

The only thing that you <u>CANNOT</u> do is break your character in any way. Don't ask them what you are supposed to say. They don't know and will not be able to help you. No one will be able to help you. If you forget stuff then just don't talk about it. Go on to the next thing. Remember, they are

---

going to be asking you questions so just go with the flow. Don't try to stick to the profile completely. Improvise.

Just please, PLEASE, _PLEASE!_ - BE NATURAL.

The filmmakers will come into the scene, talk to you, and then leave. They will never break character and neither should you. Just go back to doing what you were doing until they are out of sight.

And have a good time. It shouldn't take more than 2 or 3 hours from the time you get there. Please be on time.

And thanks again!

-Ed Sanchez

If you have problems getting any part of this fax, please call me immediately at: 301-XXX-XXXX.'
(Woodsmovie, 2014).

A Character Profile for the Market Place Man. These notes were given to actor Jim King.

SCENE 1G - ADAMSTOWN MARKET

JIM MAYNARD

Your name is Jim Maynard, and you are the same age as you are in real life. You have lived in this area all your life, and have now lived in Adamstown for at least ten years, back when you bought the store.

You basically believe that the whole Blair Witch myth is a bunch of garbage. This area you've lived in all your life is as normal as any other place in the United States. The Rustin Parr (included) thing could've happened anywhere, it had nothing to do with the Witch. Parr just used that to try to save himself. Crazy old bastard. But they hung him, and that was a very good thing. And also, when his house was burned down, that was a good thing too. You were just a kid back then (around 9 or 10) but you still remember your father and the other men heading up into the hillside that morning. A few hours later, the whole town saw the smoke rising from over the mountain. It was a great thing for the people of the town. It started the healing. Then the war a few months later made you forget the whole thing. After the war was over no one ever mentioned it again. Except for crazy old Mary Brown (included), of course.

You actually grew up with one of Rustin Parr's nephews, Charlie Fisher. He was a great friend of yours, a buddy since early grade school. Him and his mother (his father died when he was a baby) ended up moving away about a year after his uncle's hanging. They couldn't take the pressure. Some of the townspeople (especially the families of the slain children) blamed them for what happened. Even your father didn't let you hang out with Charlie anymore. You would still sneak around with him, though, but he had already changed. He would never be the old Charlie again. It was a real tragedy what happened to them, really. You've never heard from Charlie ever again.

As for the woods being haunted, that's garbage. You've been up there fishing and hiking and hunting your entire life, and you've never seen anything out of the ordinary.

That's basically it. Anything else that you would use should come from your own life and experiences. Feel free to embellish as much as you want. Anything you add will be fine as long as you keep to the basic ideas above.

Actor's notes, indicating specific action and direction that the dialogue should take. These notes were given to each actor separately.

Actors Notes Scene 4C (Woodsmovie, 2014)

JOSHUA

HEAD TO CAMPSITE (MARKER).

4C – 4:00? – WOODS

WAIT UNTIL YOU ARE 10 MINUTES FROM THE ROAD, THEN KICK IT.

Heather is lost. It's pretty apparent.

Let me see the map. We can't be that far from the car. We've been hiking for hours.

Mike has to be home tonight, Heather. He needs to get the DAT back.

Let me see the map. Fuck. I don't know where the fuck we are. Just keep heading with Heather's directions.

But don't fucking talk to me the rest of the time, Heather. Don't say a fucking word. I'm not talking to that bitch anymore.

HEATHER

HEAD TO CAMPSITE (MARKER).

4C – 4:00? – WOODS

LET THE SUBJECT OF BEING LOST COME UP, THEN START TAPING.

We're near the car. We just have to continue to head this way.

Shut the fuck up, Mike. You are such a fucking baby, you know that?

We'll find the car, just chill out. Let's get moving now. We aren't that far away. Here Josh; knock yourself out on the map. So where are we going?

I see. Now follow me.

MICHAEL

HEAD TO CAMPSITE (MARKER).

4C – 4:00? – WOODS

WAIT UNTIL YOU ARE 10 MINUTES FROM THE ROAD, THEN KICK IT.

We're fucking lost. The cunt has gotten us lost.

My ass is fucked. Any chance of getting free lance jobs from Ed are finished if I don't get that DAT to him tomorrow. He gave me the DAT for free. Do you know how much it would've cost you to rent this? I'm not sure, but quite a bit, I know that. Fuck!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

He has a paying gig tomorrow! And he trusted me. He'll never call me again.

We've got to move. Let's just keep moving to get there. But don't fucking talk to me the rest of the time, Heather. Don't say a fucking word. I'm not talking to that bitch anymore.

The Blair Witch Project

by Dan Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez

HEATHER'S PROJECT - DAY TO DAY OUTLINE

1A - HEATHER'S HOUSE - INT.

8:00 AM.

HEATHER DONAHUE lives at Hombre Fantastico Pictures. This is her small, one person production company that she operates from her home. JOSHUA LEONARD goes over to Heather's place to pick her up. He's been up since 5 am tweaking and cleaning the camera gear in preparation for this weekend's shoot.

(FILM MOS) Starts with a shot of Joshua's POV walking up to the house, Heather opens the door. First time we see her. Shots of Heather getting ready for the weekend. She is seen stuffing her pack with clothes and various camping items. Heather's room is small and the walls are adorned with various film festival posters. Joshua continues to shoot as Heather gets her things together. Heather complains to stop shooting, waving her hands to stop. Heather turns the video camera on and points it at Joshua.

(VIDEO) Joshua is seen shooting Heather and we hear sound for the first time. "See how you like it. And stop wasting film. Joshua finally stops shooting and puts the camera down. We see him for the first time. He just says that he wanted to get some stuff of her before the great journey into the unknown began. Heather's roommate, CANDY emerges from the back room obviously having just awakened. Maybe another roommate is wandering around. Heather starts toward the car, rolling video as she goes.

1B - MICHAEL WILLIAMS' HOUSE - EXT.

8:30 AM.Olney. Joshua and Heather drive to MICHAEL'S house. Michael is waiting on the porch with his sound gear at his side when they pull into his driveway. Michael still lives with his mother. Heather pulls out her video camera to record the moment. She wants to save most of the film stock for the "meat" of the story, figuring that she can pick up all this extraneous material on her inexpensive video camera.

(VIDEO) Shots from within the car as they pull up to Michael's house. We hear off screen Heather realizing that the date/time stamp in her viewfinder is wrong. The

camera shakes around a bit as she adjusts the date to the
current day. Meanwhile, Joshua helps to load Michael's
gear into the trunk of the car. Michael then climbs into
the back seat.

Heather continues to shoot while Joshua drives.

(VIDEO) We see Heather giving an impromptu interview of
Michael. Michael seems a bit uncomfortable on camera.
Heather asks him a few questions about the upcoming trip
and how he feels about camping. Michael doesn't seem to
care one way or another about camping, as long as he gets
back to work by Monday morning. Heather turns the camera
to the front as Joshua pulls into a Quick Mart. Joshua
says they have to get gas. Maybe a discussion about the
gas money.

1C - QUICK MART - EXT.

9:00 am. Joshua gets out of the car and starts to pump
gas. Michael and Heather head into the store. They all
pick up a few last minute items, extra batteries, toilet
paper, etc.

1D - ON THE ROAD IN DAYTONA

9:10 - 10:30. It's about a three hour drive to
BURKITTSVILLE. During this time Heather goes over the
plan once again with the guys on how they will start the
shoot, and who is going to be interviewed prior to going
into the woods. We get snippets of these talks on video
as they travel northward.

(VIDEO) Camera immediately comes on and we hear laughing
and giggling off screen. The camera finally squares up on
Michael as he urinates discreetly behind a tree just off
the shoulder of the road. The camera zooms in on a fuzzy
image of Michael, unaware that he's being spied on. We
can here Joshua's voice close to the microphone on the
camera. It's confirmed that he's running the side line
peep show when he pans back to Heather in the car trying
to suppress her laughter, or maybe looking at some notes
in her notebook.

1E - STAUBE'S COUNTRY INN - INT.

10:30. The group stops to eat at a diner about a half
hour outside of Blair. They discuss where they want to
pick up some establishing shots of the town and
surrounding area.

(VIDEO) Heather continues her "behind the scenes"

reporting as they talk about some locations that she and
JOSHUA scouted earlier in the week.

11:15 BACK ON ROAD.

1F - BURKITTSVILLE CEMETERY - EXT.

12:00 p.m. The filmmakers arrive in the small community
in the Black Hill area of Blair county. Heather wants to
get some establishing shots of the town. They stop at a
pre selected location off the main road. It is a quaint
cemetery at the top of a large hill. Towering over the
headstones is a large oak tree. Heather thought this
would be a good opening scene not only for its scenic
backdrop, but also the mood it establishes. She likes
"spooky".

(VIDEO) We see Joshua setting up the CP-16 in the car as
Heather narrates off screen. She ad-libs an introduction
to the making of "The Blair Witch Project". She shoots
Michael setting up the DAT recorder and microphone. A few
moments later we see Joshua getting light readings.
Heather walks over and turns her camera back on the guys
as she tells them where she thinks the "film" camera
should be placed. Joshua takes a moment to set up the
tripod as Heather pans her camera around taking in the
scenic beauty of the surrounding area. She makes a full
360 degree sweep and settles back on Joshua and Michael.
Michael is standing by at the ready as Joshua locks down
the camera on the tripod. He puts his eye to the
viewfinder. He adjusts the lens.

(FILM) Immediately we see Heather's image on black &
white film in stark contrast to the color video images a
moment before. She is pointing her video camera right at
us as Joshua continues to "roll off" a little leader. All
is silent as Heather does a little "pre slate curtsey"
towards the guys.

(VIDEO) Heather walks over to Joshua right after he shuts
off his camera to shoot him setting up the first slate.
We watch him break out his pen and write on three strips
of camera tape, "The Blair Witch Project" Director -
Heather Donahue, DP - Joshua Leonard, Sound - Michael
Williams. He places the tape on the clapper and continues
to write in scene and take numbers. We hear Heather off
screen commenting on the fact that this is the first
slate to her first feature. She seems very excited.
Heather and Joshua says they must "bless" the slate. He
hands the slate to Heather, she in turn hands the camera
to Joshua, he shoots her kissing the front of the slate
and then she gives it to Michael Joshua, he does the
same. Joshua and Michael passes the slate to Joshua as he
gives the camera over to Heather. We see Joshua Michael
kiss the front of the slate and then he kisses again.
Then he starts kidding around as he "tongues" the front

The Characters of Theophrastus[50]

1. The Dissembler (I)
2. The Flatterer (II)
3. The Coward (III)
4. The Over-Zealous Man (IV)
5. The Tactless Man (V)
6. The Shameless Man (VI)
7. The Newsmonger (VII)
8. The Mean Man (VIII)
9. The Stupid Man (IX)
10. The Surly Man (X)
11. The Superstitious Man (XI)
12. The Thankless Man (XII)
13. The Suspicious Man (XIII)
14. The Disagreeable Man (XIV)
15. The Exquisite (XV)
16. The Garrulous Man (XVI)
17. The Bore (XVII)
18. The Rough (XVIII)
19. The Affable Man (XIX)
20. The Impudent Man (XX)
21. The Gross Man (XXI)
22. The Bore (XXII)
23. The Penurious Man (XXIII)
24. The Pompous Man (XXIV)
25. The Braggart (XXV)
26. The Oligarch (XXVI)
27. The Backbiter (XXVII)
28. The Avaricious Man (XXVIII)
29. The Late Learner (XXIX)
30. The Vicious Man (XXX)

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[50] The following list is from *The Characters of Theophrastus*, (Bennett/Hammond, 1902:ix-x)),

Vow of Chastity: Dogme Manifesto

"I swear to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGME 95:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).

2. The sound must never be produced apart from the image or vice-versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).

3. The camera must be handheld. Any movement or mobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).

4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a little light be attached to the camera).

5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.

6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)

7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say the film takes place here and now.)

8. Genre movies are not acceptable.

9. The film format must be Academy 35mm.

10. The director must not be credited.

Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a 'work', as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY".

Copenhagen, Monday 13 March 1995

On behalf of DOGME 95

Lars von Trier   Thomas Vinterberg

(Hjort & MacKenzie, 2003:199