Presentness in documentary film.

What it is, and how my performance can help me record it.

by Matthew D’Arcy

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Abstract

This research is an attempt to define "presentness" in documentary film. Presentness is a term I have borrowed from performance studies where it describes a feeling when actors are unusually present. I use it here to describe moments of intense focus, uncertainty, a connection or an unexpectedness between the people I film, and myself.

Considering myself a "social actor", I apply Goffman’s work on performance in everyday life to help me understand the performances taking place in front of and behind the camera. As method, I have created "retroscripts", transcripts of recordings I made for a film where I talk to my friends about growing up in a multicultural society. I analyse these encounters, trying to understand when and why moments can lead to a feeling of presentness. Diary entries contribute a biographical element, charting my own interest and awareness of my performance as a filmmaker.

This practise-based research develops previous discussions on performance by using the transcripts to place theory in the real world of filmmaking. It connects conversations on identity by Hall, which are closely related to the subject matter of the recordings themselves, with performance theory as developed by Fischer-Lichte. It approaches theory as a way of interpreting what takes place and as a practical tool for becoming a better filmmaker.

The research engages with the work of other filmmakers with an interest in performance (Asquith, McAllister), through their films and theoretical contributions. Documentary filmmakers are split in their attitudes towards performance. Some try to get beneath the 'mask', others examine the mask itself to see what it tells us about the image we project of ourselves. Inspired by Goffman, I focus on the cracks in between, when the mask comes on or off, believing these moments to contain a spark of now and a potential for presentness. I draw parallels with different acting techniques and propose that filmmakers can benefit from learning from the preparation of actors.

While acknowledging that presentness in film is a subjective experience and its perception by an audience is dependent on context, my research suggests a better understanding of the performance of a filmmaker can help her create the conditions for presentness to occur in the creation of filmic material.
“...the tiny spark of chance, of Here and Now, with which reality has, as it were, singed its pictorial character through and through, to identify the one barely perceptible spot where, in the suchness of that long gone moment, the future still (and so eloquently lodges today in a way that enables us looking back, to locate it”).¹

Wednesday, May 4th, 2022

The computer reminds me that it’s six days until the deadline for my master thesis. A document that I have worked on in one way or another for the past two years. And I realise I’ve made a mistake.

It means that some of what I will say is wrong. Why this is, will only become (hopefully) clear later.²

In this research project I am looking at what I do when I am filming as a type of performance, considering myself a ‘social actor’ in interaction with the people in front of my camera, I will try to identify what my performance is, and does. Specifically, I am interested in how it can help me to create “presentness” in my films. “Presentness” is a concept I am borrowing from performance studies. Erica Fischer-Lichte describes it when she write, "Spectators sense that the actor is present in an unusually intense way, granting them in turn an intense experience of themselves as present”.³

Unlike theatre, film can only represent time and events that have already taken place. The actors are not physically present. There isn’t the possibility that they will forget their lines, climb off the stage and into the audience. Nevertheless, these descriptions of infectious feelings are the best way I have found to describe rare moments when I have experienced an intense concentration between myself and the people I am filming. I associate it with uncertainty, connection and curiosity. This research project is an attempt to define more closely what it is, and how my performance as a filmmaker can foster the conditions for it to occur.

² See page 42.
As a framework for this text, I am interweaving a traditional academic text, diary entries and transcripts of my own recordings for a film in which I move home to Camden in London and meet up with childhood friends to compare experiences of growing up in a multicultural society. I have decided to call these transcripts “retroscripts” as they are heavily anointed with observations made both at the time of filming, and later when making the transcriptions and trying to put place the material in a theoretical context. The script format is chosen to emphasise the performance taking place in front and behind the camera.

EXT. PUB, BRIGHTON. MATTHEW’S VOICE FROM BEHIND THE CAMERA.

MATTHEW
There was a point when my friendship and your friendship changed.

DAMIAN
Yeah

MATTHEW
And I began to...

THE SOUND OF DAMIAN INHALING ON HIS VAPE.

MATTHEW
Think of you as a real friend umm, err.

DAMIAN COUGHS.

MATTHEW
Whereas before when we were younger (SPEEDING UP) I don't know how I'd characterise it but

DAMIAN
Yeah...
DAMIAN STARTS TO INTERRUPT BUT I’VE BUILT UP A HEAD OF STEAM AND WANT TO GET IT OUT, WHATEVER IT IS.

MATTHEW
But I would say there was a mixture of... I was maybe a bit scared of you.

DAMIAN (TRYING TO INTERJECT)
There was a...

MATTHEW
Or a bit like, felt like there was an edge to it.

The script is a format that prioritises dialogue, the words. The utterance or "lyrics", by which I mean the way things are said and non-verbal communication: glances, silences etc., are written as stage directions. It is in here, between the lines, that presentness can occur.

Saturday, December 4th, 2020
Everything I’ve done has led me here, a scene where I drink coffee with an ex-girlfriend and talk about “bullar”. We are being filmed by Siri a fellow student. Here I am being funny. Now I look nervous. Now she’s telling me about her new boyfriend. We’re playing ourselves. How did I get here?

Looking back, I can trace three moments. Perhaps there's more, but I believe in threes. The first was in the first film I made on my own and is the first time my performance is a recognisable part of a film.

STORYBOARD P
Remember. Remember Matt, keep it cinematic.
Don't do too much movement keep it cinematic.
LOOKING INTO THE LENS, STORYBOARD MIMICS HOLDING THE CAMERA, SWAYING GENTLY SIDE TO SIDE.

STORYBOARD P

CAMERA CUTS TO A SIDE ANGLE.

STORYBOARD P
Don't kill the illusion. Don't do that Matt.

Storyboard P directs me from in front of the camera. The object takes control. I’m “dancing” with him, we’re improvising together. Annika smiles when I ask what happens to us when we die.

MATTHEW
What do you think happens to us when we die?

ANNIKA SMILES.

ANNIKA
I don't know. Just we die that's it.

Since discovering these moments, I’ve been trying to find ways to be more me. Expressing myself through movement, through my voice. I like the feeling of losing control. It feels like being alive. We’re improvising a version of ourselves. It’s a creative act. I sleep well afterwards. The first research I do is to read a New York Times article describing how the angle and shakiness of bodycam footage from police officers gives a “deceptive intensity” because the first-person perspective places the viewer in an active rather than passive role. The viewer's "active roll" is something I will encounter later in discussions about "egocentric space" but I will not go into details here. The "first-person" perspective interests me because, as I wrote in my notes at the time, "They give energy and an urgency". I want more of these moments so I start to look at my own performance and how I can use it to create them. First, I try to work out what kind of performance it is. I

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have no notion yet of the connections between acting technique and documentary making but I think of my filmmaking as a kind of improvisation. I find a quote I like by Derrick Bailey describing improvisation as-

”...the willingness to take risks and the acknowledgement and that doing so invests the artistic statement with a level of integrity, of personality, with a level of uniqueness that nothing else can do".  

And another by Gary Peters:

"[Improvisation is a] ...space to be entered into and occupied for as long as possible, although in reality such moments are usually fleeting".

Via performance studies, I am introduced to Erving Goffman, a sociologist who he uses the theatre as a metaphor to describe the performance inherent in all human relations. Erving’s metaphor ties in with the subject as well as form of my film about my friends. My major concern is how as teenager my friends and I learned to "perform" race. In ”The presentation of self in everyday life”, Goffman proposes how social relations are performed and offers an explanation to why moments of uncertainty, doubt, disagreement, and negotiation occur, all which are useful for me as possible sites of presentness. Goffman’s work becomes even more tangible and is somehow placed on its toes when a camera literally turns life into a performance.

EXTERIOR, ROSE GARDENS, REGENTS PARK LONDON. A SUNNY WEEKDAY MORNING IN SPRING.

T*****

7 Judith Butler’s writing in ”Gender Troubles” on the on the performance of gender, Franz Fanon’s text ”Black Skin, White Masks” and Stuart Hall’s work on cultural studies and multiculturalism all connect to this theme.
Reaching down and opening a metallic carton of dog food on to the grass. Shhh... I don’t really do this but he’s such a fussy eater. And he doesn’t really eat, so any chance I get to feed him, I’ll feed him.\textsuperscript{8}

MATTHEW

He likes paté.

T*****

Ha, it’s a lovely pate. (parodying a posh voice)\textsuperscript{9}

Hah hah. Give him a bit of cheese and a Bordeaux.

MATTHEW

He eats quite daintily. He’s careful.

T*****

(AT FIRST QUITE GENTLY) Yeah he is. He is not a scoffer. He is not. He really does take his time... but saying that it’s all gone. Hah hah hah. (A GRUFFER LAUGH.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{8} T***** asked me on the phone if I could take some pictures of his new puppy. It was an echo of one of the dynamics of our teenage friendship: on several occasions I filmed music videos and performances of his rap group. According to Broomfield, "It’s not the presence of the camera that changes people’s behaviour, it’s their relationship they have with the people behind it”.

\textsuperscript{9} T***** seems tickled by the middle-class reference to paté. Class was a defining feature of our teenage friendship. By the time we became friends we were already typecast. T***** played the hard-man. I was posh. Part of the reason I want to meet him again is to examine how we were pigeonholed into these roles as children and see if we can renegotiate them as middle-aged men. Molly Dineen, who’s films I admire, is a character through her voice behind the camera, which is distinctly middle-class. That she chooses to use it almost defiantly rather than trying to blend in was one of the qualities which first attracted me to her films. By highlighting, and reminding us of, the differences between herself and her subjects, often working-class men, her ability to get close to them feels more remarkable. During the course of her career, the focus on gender and difference has increased. More and more, her films are driven by the transformation in her relationships with her film’s subjects.

\textsuperscript{10} When I filmed T*****’s group performing, even in "behind the scenes" documentary sequences, he was in the role of rapper. I associate the occasional growly inflections with this mode of performance. They seem to occur directly after a reflection about his family life, as a way of regaining control after his guard has momentarily dropped.

The gentler tone T***** uses to describe himself in the role of father is, a lowered volume and a direct look into the camera. What I see happening before me is an improvised fluctuation between modes of performance. He and I are looking for a connection, for a harmony that we can both riff off for as long as we can before shifting to a new one. As Heidegger would have it, we are searching for a beginning.
In this encounter T***** and I are trying to work out what kind of relationship we will have after a break in our friendship of around twenty years. I’ve disguised my friend’s name to protect his identity. During the course of our conversation, T***** literally tries on different voices, ranging from almost a growl, which reminds me of his performances as a rapper I filmed when we were teenagers, to a softer address which he adopts at times when talking about his family and his dog. The effect is like a voice-breaking as one teeters on the edge between childhood and manhood.

Behind the camera, I hear myself trying to decide what kind of performer I am going to be. Will I be filmmaker or friend? Is it an interview or a conversation? Am I the “conversational springboard” Molly Dineen describes herself as or am I using T***** to say something about myself? Thirdly or fourthly, we are trying to work out how we will portray our relationship for an imagined audience represented by the camera sitting on my shoulder. My role is both co-performer and viewer. T***** is addressing both me and another imagined audience. In a sense I am forcing him into a “split performance” which at times leads to inconsistencies and perhaps helps explain the unevenness in his tone and address. Whoever takes control will have the ability to define the encounter and the presentation of reality it contains. This sounds rather heavy but there is fun to be had in these improvised roles, especially for a performer like T*****, and for me as a filmmaker.

CAMERA STAYS ON THE PUPPY LICKING THE GRASS WHERE THE FOOD HAS BEEN.

T*****

Like if I’ve got him on the lead. I could get him to do everything (the last word said with a

11 “It will be in his interest to control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him”. Goffman, Erving (1959) The presentation of self in everyday life. Penguin.

12 “The genre offers as one of the pleasures of the text the deciphering of borders between social performance, film performance and so-called private behaviour and the discovery that the boundaries are both culturally encoded and imaginary”. Asquith, Daisy (2018) Performance, Relationships and shame in documentary filmmaking.
strange yearning, like it’s a dream of his). He’ll listen.13

MATTHEW

Was he expensive?

T*****

Yeah (pauses for effect) I could have bought a car.14

MATTHEW

Hahaha.

T*****

Haha. I was supposed to buy a car and we were sup- posed to go on holiday. But lockdown happened and we couldn’t go on holiday. I was going to buy a car and we didn’t go on holiday.

MATTHEW

This is healthier though.

T***** PAUSES BEFORE CONTINUING15

T*****

Yeah it is. We were like yeah my son can start walking. My son got big quick like. Like he umm… he’s really solid now like. He’s more solid than I was at his age… Oopps (AVOIDS TRIPPING ON THE DOG). Sometimes we go out wearing the same sorts of things, we really do look like the same person. He’s big. He’s going to be big, man (TAKES HIS TONE DOWN A NOTCH AND DELIVERS THE NEXT

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13 My own family has always talked through and via the dog, using him as a ventriloquist’s doll. It started when my sister and I were children. That we continue now that we are all adults is a way of reiterating family bonds and performing a version of our family which we in some sense all yearn back to.

14 This trips off the tongue so easily it feels like a well-used line; a finely-tuned mix of evasion and bragging.

15 Is he thrown by my response? Without trying, I keep bringing the conversation back to personal subjects: family, health, responsibility. Perhaps he thought we’d talk more about the cost of the dog.
LINE MORE GENTLY) and he’s a lovely, lovely person. He really is. Yeah... (TO DOG) Come on you...

WE ARE BOTH SILENT FOR A MOMENT

MATTHEW
You must er, I suppose any father feels like concerns, like you want everything to go right for your kids.

T*****
Yeah but I am not blinkered like. Cos I know, especially where we live, what the chances are. You’ve got to create your own fields. You can’t just try and do what other people are doing, you know? You’ve really got to create your own field and try and do something. Unless your family has a business that you personally have a passion for, to be putting into that business and keep it going, then you’ve got to choose your own lane and make your own product or whatever it is.

MATTHEW
It was really like, what do you call it? Funny that you got the idea that I was thinking of moving back. It was really intuitive.16

T*****
Yeah I did. I had a feeling like, you not missing home, I don’t know. People sometimes in their memory they call one place home. That was home. Or you go past somewhere you used to live and you say that was home, that’s my home. You might want that old... you know some people want that old thing but it’s never there because everyone’s grown up and fucked off? Or they messed up, or they’re doing well. It would be nice if we could all have a big Heath

16 I change tone and tack, rejecting the “sober” idioms of money and technology and shifting focus back to the personal, to our friendship and, perhaps in an attempt to share the burden of scrutiny, myself.
party like we used to or we could all go there and see each other and just see how we are you know what I mean. Faults and all... But yeah I don’t really mix with people too much. Family is my family. I’ve got friends but I don’t really go out and do much. I’m not a raver. I don’t drink, smoke or do anything so... most people are getting intoxicated. What am I doing there?

T***** LOOKS OVER HIS SHOULDHER. LOOKING BACK NO IT’S LIKE HE’S CHECKING WHO’S AROUND BEFORE DIVULGING A SECRET.

MATTHEW

What do you do instead?

T*****

I umm...

PAUSES, LOOKS FROM SIDE TO SIDE, RUBS HIS HEAD.

T*****

I sell cocaine.

A SLIGHT PAUSE.

T*****

No I don’t...

T***** BENDS DOWN LAUGHING, DUCKING BELOW THE FRAME OF THE CAMERA. IT’S A RATHER FORCED, SAD LAUGH.

T*****

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17 This is an intuitive question, just treading water. I zoom in slightly but it might be to resize the frame to create an edit-point rather than for emotional effect.

18 As he delivers the line, T***** makes a hand gesture towards camera that is reminiscent of a variety show performer delivering a punchline. It’s a physical reminder that this is a performance as if to question the veracity of what he just said.

19 He’s waiting for my reaction. It doesn’t come.
Are you recording this?

MATTHEW

(MUMBLING) I was recording but I can...
I know that what he has just said is the truth but I am not expecting this frankness. I think we are both shocked by his recklessness.

This is a moment of presentness. T***** has dared to venture into the unknown. I don’t think he planned to say this and I don’t know how to respond. My instinct as friend is to protect him, to stop him incriminating himself. My instinct as a filmmaker is to find out more.

T*****

No, I fucking well do. But like, that’s what it is you know? And that’s a horrible, fucking boring life. I’ve done it for too long. Ooops, they you go (TRIPPING OVER THE DOG’S LEAD). I don’t know what you’re going to do with this footage. Allegedly. I am lying obviously, trying to make it look entertaining. (GLANCES OVER HIS SHOULDIER AGAIN). And I dabble in goods. Jewellery, antiques, things like that. Um, yeah. That’s about it really.

MATTHEW STUTTERS.

T*****

I don’t really sell cocaine by the way, that was just me joking... I do though, do you want some?

T***** AND MATTHEW LAUGH NERVOUSLY.

T*****

But yeah man that’s about the fucking size of it you know. Like fingers in pies, I’ve always been a good little middleman hustler. Because I can’t be doing what people are doing. The younger gentlemen
are doing stuff that we used to do but they’re doing it at a mad level. So I just get in between. I know that there’s people who like things and I am a bit of an organiser, a doer. A fixer of things.  

MATTHEW

When do you think that it was decided that this would be the way that things would be... for you?

T*****

I don’t know. I have always dabbled in things like, always. I had a hustler mentality when I was a kid. Me and my brother sold mixed herbs in Camden Town when I was about ten. (LAUGHS) We made little bags under my mum’s cooker and sealed all four corners with mixed herbs in it, hoping no-one would smell it. And we used to sell that in Camden. Which apparently is against the law cos you’re fraudulently selling drugs that don’t exist... it’s crazy. But yeah...

T***** LOOKS BORED.

MATTHEW

So why did you do that? Was it for money?

T*****

It was fun and there was money involved as well. Fun and money, who doesn’t like that as a twelve-year-old kid. You know it’s fun. Camden’s good man. It’s alright.

T*****
(LOOKING INTO THE DISTANCE) I learnt a lot from Camden. Camden learnt a lot from us. We pioneered many an avenue in Camden Town. (The last two words said wistfully as if he’s consciously or subconsciously offering me an edit point, before changing topic and tone).

The day after our meeting I receive the text message from T***** ”Mid-life crisis”. I am sill unsure who’s crisis it is he is referring to, his or mine.

Goffman divides communication into expressions *given* and expressions *given off*, between that which we consciously communicate and the symbols and signs which appear to be emitted involuntarily. The audience uses the expressions *given off* to check the validity of the performance *given*. So the performer can try to control and even fake the gestures *given off*. Goffman describes it as “a kind of information game – an infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and false discovery”.

I’d argue that different approaches to this information game represents a split in documentary methods: a desire to present people, ”characters”, (or to use Bill Nichol’s term “social actors”) as they see themselves (or would like to be seen)21, or to try and glimpse what’s behind.22 Later I will try to draw parallels between these different approaches and the ”inside-out” and ”outside-in” schools of actor’s training.

“One of most interesting times to observe impression management is the moment when a performer leaves the back region (off-stage or behind the camera) and enters the place where the audience is to be found, or when he returns therefrom, for at these moments one can detect a wonderful putting on or taking off of character”,23

Documentary film has the ability to start before the beginning, to show the moment the mask goes on. The possibility to include negotiations about character and story is one of the aspects that makes

21 As in, for example, Nicholas Barker’s “Unmade Beds” or Joshua Oppenheimer’s “The Act or Killing”.

22 As in, for example, all the films of Sean McAllister.

first on-camera meetings so interesting and potentially revealing and one of the strengths that documentary has over fiction. When we watch a fiction film, the coming into being has already taken place during rehearsals and script meetings.

The memories I have of first meeting people, especially in a new place or context are those which stick with me. This is when we are taking in impressions and expressing ourselves for new people. We are in a state of becoming, of transforming. I would argue that the first-time filming, or being filmed, fits into this category of experience. It’s often described as a screen test. The ”testing” is significant, there is a trying on and trying out of character and context.

Several times, before financing for a film or television series is in place I have been sent to meet and film potential characters, or I have sought them out of my own initiative. “Recce” (reconnaissance) filming often results in a material that has a lightness to it, a sense of fun and naivety which can evaporate when more money and people and their expectations, weigh heavily on the experience. During first encounters, equipment is usually limited to a small lightweight camera. It gives the material an amateurish aesthetic, existing in border between professional and private home videos which, in the modern lexicon of documentary film, gives it an extra sense of authenticity.

Onscreen negotiations about the nature of the what is being recorded emphasise that the material’s meaning is not fixed, and that the filmmaker’s position is only one possible reading of reality. The audience is challenged to think about what their own position is, potentially distancing them from the filmmaker. Sharing the filmmaking process with the viewer can conversely bring her closer to the filmmaker’s perspective and thus draw her closer into the film. The present filmmaker is after all present in the filmed material so is still part of the film. Exposing the filmmaker’s uncertainty, even her failed attempts to control the filmed encounter (or experience) can give the filmed material a feeling of uncertainty and improvisation that gives the viewer a feeling of presentness or nowness.

Monday, September 6th, 2021
When we were small we didn't know what the differences between us meant. At some point we our differences were given meaning by the outside world.
I think I began to desire this otherness. I was both scared and attracted to it. It was poetic, dangerous. I dressed myself in its costume. When I found out it existed, I was jealous. It would always be out of reach.24

DAMIAN
There was a big period all right with me Michael and Mono, and James.

MATTHEW
James Adou?

DAMIAN (CONT'D)
PAUSES Where we felt it was a bit them and us. You know, when we were going up Hampstead25 and stuff like that.

DAMIAN
We felt like outsiders.

DAMIAN CONTINUES SLOWLY, CHOOSING HIS WORDS CAREFULLY.

DAMIAN
We'd always felt like wronguns. You know you get that in to your head at what age are we talking about, fifteen, sixteen?

DAMIAN
We felt like we didn't deserve any

24 I've obviously been reading Stuart Hall again: "To say it's all about class is to deny the visual difference which is printed on the skin. Class and race like a pampliset" and "Looking always involves desire; to see more, what you can't see, to see into, to see beyond, behind".

25 Hampstead is a wealthy North London suburb. In the 1990's and perhaps still today, the high-street was famous as a meeting place on Thursday nights for teenagers, especially those from the large local Jewish community.
The mixture of relative wealth and poverty I was exposed to growing up in Camden is probably one of the reasons for my interest in performance, social and in documentary film. Specifically, my obsession with the shifting of roles which can happen in documentary film (unlike fiction where the roles are fixed by the time the camera rolls). It has probably also given me skills that have helped me as a filmmaker: an ability to navigate different social situations, to become something of a chameleon. Conversely, I wonder if this shapeshifting has made it harder for me to portray myself as a character.

DAMIAN
...we were just bored and running around doing shitty things, thieving and fighting and robbing and doing shit stuff because we didn't really know any better and we didn't feel trusted to do anything better. But there was a period, that whole thing around Savernake road. Which is obviously where Harry, Zoe, Vicky, Sarah and the times in Hampstead when we were hanging around up there, when there was a lot more young people our age who were a lot more privileged than us, being really nice to us. And trusting us to come back to their house. And there may have been an element, certainly with the likes of Zaya and the ones in Hampstead of like, playing with fire a little bit. But at the same time....

MATTHEW

26 "We all learn our race and our place... By thirteen we have learnt the meanings and implications of our racial identities quite well... By twenty-five, even if you don't read Stuart Hall, if you grew up both black and poor in the UK you will have come to know more about the inner workings of British society, about the dynamics of race, class and empire than a slew of PHD's ever will. In fact PHD's and script-writers will come to the hood to drain your wisdom for their ethnographic research..." Akalla (2018) Natives. Two Roads.
What do you mean?

DAMIAN
We were the bad boys. And I didn't feel patronised and I might be reading too much in to it. I don't know.. but at that age everyone is a bit impressionable. We were certainly impressionable and I think our bad boy status and the shit we were up to was probably quite attractive to certain girls that we were hanging around with. But the fact is, and I knew it at the time, I felt really humbled by the way we were treated by (little pause) middle-class white people.

... I think it made us realise, this is going to sound really cliched, white people aren't so bad.

**Wednesday, March 23rd 2022**

Spoke to Miles, he reminded me of how we used to work in teams. TV production schedules and formats meant that several directors would work in shifts, or at the same time, filming the same subjects.

One of the first things we'd do was train the subjects to incorporate our questions into their answers. We formulated our questions so the we could cut them out in the edit suite. Our performances as filmmakers were thus hidden. There were practical reasons for this, we needed to a degree to be interchangeable. The subject’s performance would be inconsistent if they appeared to behave differently with the different people who were filming them. You'd wonder who the different voices behind the camera belonged to. It might lead to confusion
My accent is varies depending on my company. From the age of eleven, when I went from primary school to a tough London comprehensive, I adjusted the way I spoke to hide a slight speech impediment, and to fit in. “Th” became “F”. I started saying “Fink” instead of “Think”. Some friends still call me “Maffew”. My different registers can lead to awkward social performances when I am forced to perform for a mixed audience.

Phil, a colleague who's material I have had the privilege to edit, has a strong Yorkshire accent which is unusual in television where people behind the camera traditionally sound more like me. It was always a shame to cut out his questions. I became as much interested in him as the people he filmed. With access to all the rushes I could see how his relationships developed, how he became close enough with his subjects to be able to ask tough, revealing or soft and sentimental questions in his gruff voice.

Sean McAllister is a filmmaker from Hull, the same town in the North of England as my father. On his website he states ”My duty as a filmmaker is to get behind the performance”. He is a part of generation of British filmmakers who studied at the Nation Film and Television school under Colin Young who invented the term “observational filmmaking” Combining a background in theatre teaching at UCLA and an interest in ethnological film, (where he engaged with the work of amongst others Jean Rouch), Young was a pioneer in looking at performance in documentary film.

ZOOM TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH SEAN McALLISTER FROM CPH: DOX, APRIL 2022

SEAN
Where are you based in Sweden?

MATTHEW
I'm based in Stockholm.

SEAN
Are you from the UK originally?

MATTHEW
I'm from England, yeah.

SEAN
So how come you're over there?
MATTHEW
Well I moved here, well I moved there for about seven years ago... I'm doing this MA here and I am making a film about going back to London and talking to friends who I grew up with, black friends, about how it was for us growing up in a multicultural society, how we kind of saw each other. I came from quite a relatively privileged upbringing but I went to a normal comprehensive school and so you met people from very different home situations mixing together.

SEAN
What part of London?

MATTHEW
Camden.

SEAN
The thing that's always fascinated me about London though is that could probably grew up in one of those houses in Camden Square, go to school in a comprehensive and be mates with some people from the tower blocks.

MATTHEW
Exactly. I went to my first ever rave on Camden square at the Irish centre and the police came and stopped it and then someone threw a brick throw the police car's window. It was, I mean it was brilliant.

... 

SEAN
Colin Young was the grandfather who just died recently... Before I went to the NFTS I'd read his work on documentary filmma-
king and he was using the same terminology as fictional. He said casting is the same process in a documentary. You're casting your character and you're handing your stage to a real person who's a character in a documentary. He's had such a massive influence. He was the person who brought Nick Broomfield through in the first intake at the NFTS. Later he brought Molly Dineen through and Kim Lingolotto. These were the guys I watched when I was in a factory thinking what am I doing here? I want to do something else with my life.

SEAN

...Colin was all about the more honest approach. This bullshit that British TV had about the fly on the wall, as if we're invisible is a deceit. And the fly in the soup is something that I'd read about from the American cinema verité movement. Not only are we here but we're here and we're going to disrupt it. Hah hah. And the audience are going to be aware of our presence on that so I suppose that's what I went on to in my own way as a real presence in the film...it's about consciously leaving the imperfections in, leaving the silly questions in so that instead of being the perfect... you're flawed as a filmmaker as well... Sometimes you ask a stupid question. It makes me real rather than a super duper BBC professional.

MATTHEW

And why do you want to do that?

SEAN

Because it's a real relationship like you have with a mate. It's the more ordinary, more real, I'm not... Why would I make my-
self perfect. I suppose cos I'm not a journalist. They're films about relationships aren't they, they're films about friendships as much as the films are about beginning, middles and ends and about exploring country. They're like a funnel. They start wide and in the end they become about an intimate relationship between two people.

MATTHEW
These silly questions, are you asking deliberately silly questions?

SEAN
No, no I don't mean leaving them in deliberately. Usually you'd edit out the fluff like you'd edit out your mate's voice completely. Ollie would be leaving in (?) some of the stuff. I'd be like you can't leave that in you cunt and he said you can because it's really you.

Cutting myself out was initially at least, a pleasure. Looking at raw material is in many ways reliving again and again your mistakes. "Correcting" my own performances, mostly by rendering them invisible was one of the things that attracted me to the edit suite.

Later I began to realise that I have a more ambivalent relationship with the limelight. Then, after working on a series where the characters reacted badly to how they were portrayed I wanted to put myself in the firing line, to stop hiding behind the camera.

The starting point for my exam film about my teenage friends resulted from seven years in Stockholm, away from home. Seven years is quite a long time. Long enough to feel an itch. After seven
years one is tempted to try something new or is becoming aware that the time for new things is passing and an acceptance that this will be forever.27

I believe the seven years felt for my closest friends like a rejection. They were partly right, the move to Stockholm was more about leaving London. I wanted to be somewhere else. Now when I visit home I feel an expectation to be a version of myself that is outdated. It means a struggle to resist being subsumed by old definitions and assert my new self. In doing so I better define it. The experience of displacement has created the distance to see the contours of who I was, and who I am becoming, to see myself through time and space.

Sunday, October 10th 2021
Matthew the filmmaker is not the same as Matthew the friend.
The Matthew that left is not the same as the Matthew who came back.
The friends Matthew remembers don't exist anymore.28

I'm trying to be a better filmmaker, to listen more, react more, open up myself. But it's all an act. If I don't try, then I perform badly. I don't listen, I interrupt, avoid difficult emotions. But it's how I really am. Shall I be a better filmmaker or my truthful self?

In October 2021 Siri Pårup, a fellow student, visits me in London to record some scenes for my film. I had organised a series of meetings. One by one they all fall through. The week was to culminate in a day of interviews at the local library. No one shows up and I eventually I am forced into the interview chair myself.

27 "It seems to be about seven or eight years until you confess to yourself that you have chosen to live somewhere else. Then you, or anyone else who's been through the experience, has this question of who are you? Where do you belong? You do feel at home in both cultures, you know a great deal about them both from the inside. You do find it difficult to say "we" or "us" about either of them. You speak about "them" from each place as it were. This is the multicultural experience. This is a very benign form of it of course because many people are moving under serious economic or other forms of distress driven by civil war or poverty and so on". Hall, Stuart (1999) In Our Time, multiculturalism. BBC Radio 4.

28 I wrote in my diary in third person. Reading it back now, I cringe at my pretentiousness. I write my name three times! I try to remind myself that it was an effort to look at my performances from the outside.
Sitting where my friends should have been, I’d made myself vulnerable. It was almost as if I’d wished failure on myself. I’d certainly felt it coming. Now, with the moment of defeat upon me, I experience a relief. A reckless sense of bravery gives me courage and freedom to express myself more fully than I’d dared before. Afterwards, I even feel the catharsis attributed to opening up in front of a camera that I’d previously been skeptical of.

I try to explain to Siri why my friends might be nervous of appearing in my film. I suggest that although we’re supposed to care less about ourselves as we get older, the middle-aged man is in a peculiarly sensitive position. The time to create yourself is running out. Perhaps that’s where the tendency to mythologise one’s youth comes from; to justify the present. Or to avoid it.

**MATTHEW**

We all need to feel like we are some form of success. We do this by carving out an identity for ourselves within a context where we have the means to be successful: financially, academically, physically, spiritually, sexually, etc., using the identities available to us. For example, I appear to be in the process of redefining myself as an intellectual.

These were thoughts I had never articulated. In the moment, I come to a new realisation, a connection between the adjustment of identity happening to my friends and I as we reach middle age and the intense process of identity creation that happens during childhood and teenage years.

**MATTHEW**

As a child you’re learning about the concepts of race and class and the meanings given to them at the same time as you’re discovering the facts of your existence: your gender, skin colour, where you live, what your parents do for a job etc. We are constantly defining our identities according to, or against, our circumstances and the ideas of others.29

29 This is my take on an idea of Stuart Hall’s.
The intensity of concentration has an energy of its own.

Afterwards, we say we think we've got something. It could just be relief that the ordeal is over, but I prefer to believe that something is the connection when the camera records people trying to communicate with each other. This is the feeling I am calling presentness, a concentration in the moment; a transference of energy.

Earlier in the week, we’d recorded our conversations behind the camera as we framed camera angles for shots that would ostensibly illustrate the area where my friends and I grew up. I used these conversations, as if recorded accidentally, to talk about my feelings about living back at my parents and my growing anxiety about whether my friends would show up to be filmed. My idea was that it would transform the images from being representational, an illustration of an area where we had once lived, to something happening now.

Following these experiments at the edge of the frame, the shift in perspective that occurred when I stepped into it at the library was a development that had begun to feel inevitable. Yes, I was in control of the destiny of the material, I would be able to cut out anything I want, but the responsibility that came with that made me feel if anything more vulnerable. It illuminated a truth; the film I set out to make about my black friends was really a film about my relationship with black people. We always use other people to say something about ourselves. We travel to far way places to better see our own contours.

The following is a transcription of my first onscreen meeting with Lucia who works as a cleaner in my mum and dad’s apartment.


30 Carlsen, Jon Bang speaking at CPH:Dox academy 2021. (From memory).
HE HAS STEELED HIMSELF FOR THE ENCOUNTER, MATTHEW APPROACHES AND TURNS INTO THE KITCHEN.

MATTHEW:

Hi Lucia.

ALMOST AT THE SAME TIME WHILST RAISING A BOWL TO COVER HER FACE.

LUCIA:

Please, no (FIRST LAUGHING AND THEN MORE PLEADING)please.

MATTHEW:

Um, you...

LUCIA:

(MORE QUICKLY) But I don’t want to talk, yeah? I don’t need to talk.

MATTHEW:

You don’t want to talk?

LUCIA:

No.

It’s often the people you want to film most who are the most reluctant to be filmed. At the other end of the scale, people who are desperate to be filmed are considered somehow inauthentic or shallow. The challenge of winning a character over or “breaking them down” is part of documentary film’s holy grail of truth, the more hard-won the better. Indeed, the unravelling or unveiling of character is the dramaturgy of many films. I would suggest this dramaturgy is particularly prevalent in films by performative filmmakers. In the films of Molly Dineen and Sean McAllister, the deve-

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31 “…there is a shame in British culture about demanding too much attention, or pushing oneself forward. There is also a sense among documentary makers that those that want to be filmed are not somehow the right people to film. Perhaps it is a leftover from direct cinema; the idea that we should film reality as if a fly on the wall, that those that wish to perform the self may perform too much.” Asquith, Daisy (2018) Performance, Relationships and shame in documentary filmmaking. University of Sussex.
lopment of an onscreen relationship is the story and the (sometimes accentuated) differences between the characters behind and in front of the camera becomes the obstacle that they must overcome.

Reluctance to be filmed, as well as being of course genuine, can be coyness, a false modesty or often a mixture of the two. It’s the other side of the game of trying to get under the skin, or behind the mask. Limiting access can be used as a tactic to maintain some control of a situation where the odds are usually heavily stacked in the filmmaker’s favour. However, the more resources the filmmaker invests, in terms of energy, time and money, the greater the potential for the balance of power to shift in favour of the person being filmed. When filming “Storyboard P, a stranger in Sweden”, his desire for exposure and my need for him to complete the film placed us in a mutually dependent relationship. The resulting tension ran like an undercurrent through the filming, into the edit and even the through the process of distribution.

LUCIA:
(WALKING TO TOWARDS THE CAMERA) What do you want to know? Cut a little bit because I don’t want to... pauses... I want something like really good but not like... it’s not really good now. My presentation, oh my goodness.

LUCIA:
(COMING A STEP CLOSER TO THE CAMERA) Now I am not prepared to talk, no?

MATTHEW:
Can I film you though?

LUCIA:
What?
MATTHEW:
Can I film you? 32

LUCIA:
Yeah, yeah. But no talk no. I don’t talk. Just do-ing my thing yeah? Heh heh. 33

MATTHEW:
But you always talk.

LUCIA:
I know.

LUCIA IS PUTTING THE PLATES FROM THE DISHWASHER INTO THE CUPBOARDS. SHE PAUSES AND LOOKS UP SMILING AT THE CAMERA.

MATTHEW:
But now you’re shy.

LUCIA:
Yes, I feel shy now.

LUCIA:
(I’m) looking for the place to put the things be-cause sometimes I am always wrong.34

MATTHEW:
It’s difficult in the new kitchen.

LUCIA:

32 Why do I keep asking? My head is split, half here and half in an imaginary classroom in Stockholm where my professors and fellow students sit with eyebrows raised. I picture them questioning the ethics of filming Lucia who cleans my mum and dad’s apartment because of the inequality in our relationship. They (or is it me?) doubt Lucia’s ability to say no. I continue to ask, as if it will be ok as long as I ask, as long as I get Lu-cia’s verbal consent. I am consciously performing as a filmmaker, suppressing the other performance I do with Lucia, the one which I’d like to explore on camera. I am falling into a trap described by Sartre. “The atten-tive pupil who wishes to be attentive, his eyes riveted on the teacher, his ears open wide, so exhausts himself in playing the attentive role that he no longer hears anything”. Satre (1938) cited by Goffman (1959).

33 Lucia’s laugh could be a tactic to avoid conflict. It is in both of our interests to define this encounter as a game, to avoid the risk of causing offence. If the initial dance continues, without the asking for or giving of a commitment, the relationship stagnates, like any relationship.

34 Following Lucia’s actions momentarily give me a chance to think.
No it’s ok, but maybe a few days more. And I’m used to do it.

MATTHEW:
Yeah, the old kitchen you would know so well.\textsuperscript{35}

LUCIA:
No, this one as well. Because I know where to put it but I don’t want to put it in the wrong place. For your mum to always find in the right place. And also…\textsuperscript{36} you.

LUCIA:
I am going to put water as well to the plants.\textsuperscript{37}

MATTHEW:
Thank you for the coffee.\textsuperscript{38}

LUCIA:
Ahh, welcome… I owe you a coffee huh?

\textsuperscript{35} I want to establish, for my film, that Lucia and I have known each other for a long time. I am stressing the personal in our relationship. I think I am also hinting at a narrative that I would like to explore, that my mother and father have moved from a house into this more modest apartment. I try to achieve these aims, which are unarticulated at this point even for myself, through improvisation based on Lucia’s dialogue and actions.

\textsuperscript{36} Was Lucia reluctant to include me? It points to the two roles I am performing at the same time, as filmmaker Matthew and Matthew, son of Kate and Doug. Appearing before two audiences at the same time causes confusion for a performer. It’s the same slippage that occurs between Lucia performing as a cleaner and as a family friend; in order to accept that Lucia cleans up our mess we must to some extent see her in her idealised role as cleaner which means she must suppress, or we must ignore, some of the other expressions of her character.

"There is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavour to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor. A grocer who dreams is an offence to the buyer because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limits himself to his function as grocer, just as the soldier at attention makes himself into a soldier-thing with a direct regard that does not see at all, which is no longer meant to see, since it is the rule and not the interest of the moment which determines the point he must fix his eyes on (the sight "fixed at ten paces". There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition". Satre (1938) cited by Goffman (1959).

I am trying to explore the tension in our relationship to challenge my own ideas about London as an integrated city and myself as a person who believes and practises equality.

\textsuperscript{37} This last statement is given as explanation. Lucia is reclaiming control of the performance, giving an explanation of reality and directions as to what I may film: her doing her jobs, less complicated than this exchange we’ve entered into which touches somehow on our rather murky friendly / professional relationship.

\textsuperscript{38} I try to keep it personal, keep it about our relationship.
Yeah at this time of day.

LUCIA:
I have my one here.

LUCIA MAKES A CHEERS GESTURE WITH HER CUP. SHE CONTINUES WORKING AND THEN LOOKS UP AT THE CAMERA.

MATTHEW:
You can say no you know if you don’t want me to...

LUCIA:
What?

MATTHEW:
You can say... you can say no you know if you don’t want me to film you.

LUCIA:
Yeah I know it’s fine. Cos I didn’t know what to say you know. Because maybe you need something, very good stuff you know? No?

MATTHEW:
No just normal.

LUCIA:
Like a routine yeah?

MATTHEW:
(SLIGHTLY DEFLATED) Yep.

LUCIA ALSO LOOKING SLIGHTLY DEFLATED WALKS TOWARDS THE CAMERA. THERE’S AN AWKWARD MOMENT WHEN MATTHEW HAS TO MOVE TO LET HER PAST AND OUT OF THE ROOM.

CUT TO WIDE SHOT OF LUCIA HANGING UP DISHCLOTHS TO DRY.

LUCIA:
I have to hang up the clothes because the machine is not working. A very good model yeah?

MATTHEW:
A very good... what did you say?

LUCIA:
A very good model to do your film.

MATTHEW:
Oh you're a very good model, yes.

LUCIA:
(POINTING TO THE BALCONY). Now I am going to put water to the garden.\footnote{Lucia is suggesting that she and I form a “performance team” where we conspire to create a scene: Lucia will play an idealised role of cleaner, and I will perform as an idealised audience. This means suppressing other attributes of our personalities and our personal relationship. My aim, however, is to try to film just these attributes. Our ongoing negotiation gives the exchange a nerviness, an unpredictability which I consider a form of presentness. Talking about what we will film places this material in a temporal position before the performance. The audience are backstage, before the make-up and mask of performance is applied.}

...

LUCIA:
You’re filming now or cut?

MATTHEW:
No, no I cut.

\textit{Friday August 20\textsuperscript{th} 2021} \\
This morning I filmed the first twenty odd minutes of my day.

I've been wondering about taping over the stop button on the camera. On older or other cameras there was a lock function that would have done it. To try and train myself to keep going I went round the local supermarket with the camera on, aware that what I was filming was mostly unusable.
“Real time is thought to be more "truthful" than filmic time, hence the long-take”. 40

Here, Trinh Minh-Ha is questioning the idea that there is a stable truth that cinema can represent and arguing against a naturalist aesthetic that claims an unfiltered link to reality. There is nothing intrinsically truthful about a long shot. We experience life not as a linear shot that cuts only when we blink. We hop backwards and forwards, revisiting memories, dreams, zooming in on details, a palimpsest, the craziest montage you can imagine. But while we are making movies in our heads, I believe we experience time outside, in the real world as constant, it may slow down or speed up but it doesn’t generally jump like it does in films or dreams. So, when we experience an especially long shot in a film it captures our attention, firstly because it so different from most of that we see in films, and secondly because it conforms to the rules of the real world, I believe we can experience a feeling of presentness.

“What is distinctively temporal about film is not its portrayal of time, but the manner of its portrayal-al: its portrayal of time by means of time”. 41

Films generally, but not always, depict a period of time which is longer than the duration of the film. Edits are experienced as a break in time. Something is being cut out. Continuity edits hide this break in time, matching movement, positioning and angles. Incidental music can shatter the illusion of continuous time. The disharmony draws attention to the edit, and to what might be missing.

In The Settlers, Sean McAllister tries to film an interview Ali who's on an alcoholic binge whilst there's loud music playing in the background. Sean begins to confront Ali about his drinking. Ali fires irritated glances towards Sean behind the camera and fiddles with a cassette player, trying to get it to start. There is a cut to a close up of Ali, now with music playing quite loudly. Presumably Ali has turned the music on, perhaps he’s turned it on to sabotage the interview.

The music however lends the scene a sense of urgency and a rhythmic quality. I am reminded of the editing style of Johan Söderberg, cutting up dialogue so it appears as if the words were a sample or

40 Minh-Ha, Trinh (1990) Documentary is not a name. MIT Press

lyrics to a song. I am also reminded of an anecdote I heard about Frederico Fellini's method of shooting with music playing (and then rerecording dialogue in post-production) so that it appears sometimes that the actors are almost dancing.

What interests and excites me most however about the scene with Sean and Ali and the music playing is that it creates a moment of real time within the film time. By recording with music in the background, McAllister places himself under a time pressure. Once the music is on, he can't cut. Ali confronts him, asking him in effect how he, an Englishman, can possibly understand the situation of a Palestinian living under occupation. Sean has to defend himself and turn the focus back to Ali, and he is has to do it "live", before Ali loses patience or interest. At one moment it looks as though Ali is drifting off to sleep, his eyes glaze over. Sean asks "Would you be happy with Arafat?" to which Ali laughs and waves a hand as if to dismiss Sean. Sean has asked an uncharacteristically political question, like one of the journalists who’s narrative he tries to get beneath. Seeing to realise his mistake, Sean shouts slightly desperately over the music "Ali, let me ask you one more question". Again, he sounds like a journalist at a press conference. It appears strangely formal in this situation, that Sean should ask permission to ask a question. He then asks twice, first loudly and secondly more softly

"What will make you happy?"

A tear begins to run down Ali's cheek and Sean cuts to a photograph of Ali and his estranged wife. In a sense, this is Sean's answer to Ali's question: he can understand because ultimately Englishmen and Palestinian men are motivated and plagued by the same things. We like a drink and we all have women troubles.

I think the imposition of real time into the filmic time gives the scene its tension, its liveness, its presentness. It reminds me of "Three Poems by Spoon Jackson", a short film by Michel Wenzer. A poem is being recorded down a phoneline from a prison. The recording is interrupted by beeps and recorded messages from the prison’s phone system telling us that the duration of the call is limited. There is a pressure to record the poem in time. It’s a countdown. Wenzer increases the sense of urgency by editing the audio to pictures of a train racing towards, and eventually over, the camera.
SPOON
Here we go... Pot...

RECORDED MESSAGE
This recorded call is from an inmate at a Californian State correctional facility.

SPOON
Pot bellied stove.

BEEP 42

SPOON
The old, round tin tub that lay next to the pot bellied stove where my mother washed our clothes and bodies has long since rusted.

PAUSE. SOUNDS OF THE TRAIN THE PASSES ABOVE THE CAMERA, LYING ON THE TRACKS.

SPOON
Father stays at home now but he didn't when mother was there. I stood by the phone thinking of football.

BEEP

SPOON
And a voice inside me told me to call home.

BEEP BEEP (INTERRUPTING)

42 The beeps and interruptions place the call in a "now", preventing them from becoming narration, keeping them separate from the images of the train. It's both poetic but also firmly rooted in the present.

The tension comes from being drawn in to the poem and then dragged out of it. Time seems to slow down as we enter the world represented in the poem, and the images and music that accompany it, and then speeds up again as we come back to its recording.

These interruptions: beeps, background music, even the quality of the recording; now I am thinking of Trinh Min-ha's near whisper when she talks “next to”. These elements emphasise the materiality of their recording. The words refuse to be reduced to their symbolic function, they keep both their meaning and their utterance. The recordings insist on an awareness of the performance (or is it performativity) of speech and places the audience in that specific “now”. (In a way, it’s the behind the scenes feeling again). The act of recording reveals the filmmaker, performing the film.
RECORDED MESSAGE

Your telephone call will be terminated in one minute.

SPOON

My father answered the phone. We haven't spoken in thirteen years. His voice wasn't as strong as I remembered and the one or two minute conversation, the longest ever.

THE TRAIN SOUNDS ARE SLOWED DOWN.

SPOON

I am not the boy he knew then. I am not the boy I knew then. He is not the father I feared years ago.  

BEEP BEEP.

I must have been inspired by Wenzler's film when I record my own voice on a train journey. I wait until I have nearly reached my destination, the seaside town of Folkestone, before recording the notes I had written on the way.

MATTHEW

Folkestone is like visiting a film that never was. full of things I'd never film: the drop-outs outside the STUMBLE the drop-outside the full English cafe BEEP the art space...

RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENT

We will shortly be arriving at Folkestone West.

MATTHEW

The artist's space where I'd edit the film. The pints in Wetherspoons or the posh new arty pub. Full of disappointment for my friendship with Kwesi and a sense of confusion. Attempts

43 Using time to look at time is very clever. We are in on the phone line, in the poem’s time which is now another phonecall, remembering another time, the narrator’s childhood. It comes close to depicting a lived experience of time.
to reason away it, blame it on the camera or on the baby, work. SPEEDING UP A BIT Underneath it a nothingness, an unknowing. INHALE I am determined our friendship will outlive this.

THE SOUND OF PAGES TURNING.

MATTHEW
If he can forgive me BEEP BEEP BEEP I can forgive him. My old boots, jumper, face mask. Things didn't turn out the way we imagined. The differences between us are bigger.

DING DONG.

RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENT
Welcome aboard this south-eastern service to Ramsgate

DOORS SLAMMING.

RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENT Calling at Folkestone Central, Dover Priory, Ramsgate.

MATTHEW
The differences between us are bigger. I've been gliding at the centre of other people's lives, not wanting to be at the centre of my own.

(MORE)

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
The friendship I am building with Michael feels good, an attempt to STUMBLE, EXHALE The friendship I am building with Michael feels good an attempt to readress inequalities in our past. I have fears that it is in an attempt to take... Arghh I have fears... I have fears that it is an attempt to tame my fears, control my demons.... I have fears MUMBLING REPEATING SENTENCE but I
choose not to listen. I want to give him a book DING DONG before I leave...

RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENT
The next station is Folkestone Central.

MATTHEW
"The curious incident of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde". He would call me Darkness when we took coke together. With him I let the darkness out. Now it's just light for me. IT's an attempt to address the balance between light and dark if a friendship can do that. I've lost a sense of who I've become and regained a sense of who I was.

PAPER RUSTLING. PAGES TURNING.

BING BONG.

RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENT We will shortly...

MATTHEW (competing with the announcement, talking over it rushing to get it out ) I am reminded of my own significance. My friends have continued to live their lives which I stopped being a part of long ago. I have also been reminded of my responsibility to my family (racing ) I feel such a dumb sense of pride for London. I have begun to see myself in everyone.

BANG. SOUND OF MICROPHONE STRIKING AGAINST SOMETHING. THE RUSTLING SOUND OF MOVEMENT. PAUSE, THEN BEEP BEEP BEEP.

MATTHEW Oh...

SUDDEN EXTERIOR SOUNDS. VOICES, BIRDS. A TRAIN STATION PLATFORM. BANG.

MATTHEW
I've begun to see myself in everyone. That we all related.
Seeing that Oscar is a part of his dad and a part of my sister and part of me. I find that I can love the part that is his father's as I love the part that is from me. Therefore I can love all children and all adults. "Patriotism is not enough I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone". Even myself.

WHISTLE. SOUND OF TRAIN DRAWING AWAY FROM THE STATION.

Tuesday, March 8th, 2022

On the top of Primrose Hill, I bump into Marvin. He was an infamous character when I was a teenager. Now he has a youtube channel where he talks about his gangster past and his road to reformation. What is so compelling about his videos is the emotion with which he tells his stories. Even on the top of Primrose Hill, on a sunny summer morning, he is soon practically in tears. He has the emotional connection to past events which we try to create in interviews. His problem, which also makes him a great "character" is that he can't disconnect. Perhaps his youtube channel is his form of therapy. I begin to feel, sitting on the bench, that I’ve heard this story before in one of his films. It makes the story feel less genuine, more anecdotal, even though the emotion is real, a bit like the tears of the drunk who repeats the same story of his broken heart. I begin to want to "puncture" his performance, to take him out of his comfort zone and into the now.

Marvin’s physicality, in which I include his deep tone of voice and his prosthetic eye, draws attention. Looking through the material we filmed after our meeting on Primrose Hill, I am struck by

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44 Inscribed on the statue of Edith Cavell in Trafalgar Square, London.
how often I film his face in close-up. His afro is a soft frame, like a vignette, around his features. The disparity between his real and false eye fascinates and fools me. Am I looking in the right eye?

Fischer-Lichte describes certain stage actors as having a corporeal presentness the comes from their physical attributes and movement on the stage regardless of the character they are playing. This focus on the body has been frowned on by critics from both moral and artistic standpoints. The goal of theatre technique for some time was to dissolve the actor into the character to create a "pure" performance.

I believe Marvin possesses both physical presence and a presentness that comes from his ability to play a character. His current performance as an ex-gangster works in tandem with his physicality. It’s a role he was born to play. He is able to reach what Fischer-Lichte describes as an "embodied mind" where his body is an expressive extension of his mind. His pauses feel like thoughts. He has an ability to reconnect with emotions from past experiences that method actors would be envy.

Despite, or even because of, Marvin’s strengths, I am concerned about including him in my film. His inclusion goes against an early articulated ambition to avoid "extreme" characters, by which I mean extroverts with extraordinary stories. Instead, I’d decided to focus on ”normal” people who are close to me, as a way of getting as close as I can to the showing the world as I experience it. (The question whether it’s the world I experience without the camera that I am trying to show, or if I am using the camera as a way of exploring the world, doing things I wouldn’t usually do, confuses this division. I probably wouldn’t have spoken so much or openly with Lucia without the pretext of the camera. I definitely wouldn’t have approached Marvin. So what’s the difference?).

Filming reluctant characters, like Lucia, affects my own performance. I am forced to take a lead: to break silences, and thus reveal more about myself. That this doesn’t come naturally gives the resulting material an uncertainty, a trepidation which can feel honest and edgy.

With extrovert characters it’s the opposite. I am tempted to hide in Marvin’s shadow. It is easy to get stuck in the passive stance of an imagined audience; I ask myself ”who am I to interrupt such a graphic, emotional story?”.

I am struck by an opposing thought: perhaps I need a strong character to play against. Marvin’s commanding performance and my own less self-assured one fit well together. My father is a good talker (!) and I grew up in a state of conversation counterattack, commenting or undermining him. Looking back, I continued to seek out friendships that follow this pattern, including with the tougher kids from my teenage years.

I notice how often there’s a long silence between Marvin and I which wait for him to break before quickly asking a question. A bit like a counter-punch in boxing. Our combination leads to a good sparring match which perhaps brings out the best in us. But it also feels regressive for him trying to change from being a gangster and for me who is trying to connect to my past from my position in the present. For our relationship to develop it is inevitable that I have to lead, to challenge the old roles we slip into. And he will have to trust my lead.

Marvin has described being filmed by me as ”gathering data” a metaphor which negates my role to a machine operator, operating the camera. I suspect it is his way of putting off the issue of control over the film and about whether to trust me a director, whilst allowing himself to be filmed in a vulnerable situation.

In May 2022, I invite Marvin to Stockholm to take part in the exposition where I will present my research into presentness. He and I will record a live scene in front of an audience to see if we are able to reach a sense of presentness. When the camera starts rolling I only get to ask one question before he launches into a highly emotion description of the racism he experienced as a mixed race child from Liverpool arriving in London. His breathing becomes strained, he is almost hyperventilating. I don’t never if this is an effect or a cause of his emotional state. Afterwards he admits that he induced the emotion himself. He says if he had followed my plan it wouldn’t have worked. It reminds me Judith Weston’s description of Hollywood stars who don’t trust an unknown director and use their own technique to create a performance. From my perspective, the most successful part of the performance took place after it had officially finished. During the question and answer session I was able to hand over the camera and sit beside Marvin in the frame. Whether it was a new dynamic or the improvisational element, it creates a dynamic between us which feels much more nuanced and in the present.
I’m almost at the end of my text and I’ve hit a sort of problem, a moment of doubt. I’ve been thinking of presentness as a distancing effect, focusing more and more on reflexive moments in films which create an awareness of the active act of watching, making the audience aware of themselves and thus feel present. Whether or not they do so is however another matter. A shot with a long duration may create a feeling of extra intensity or imitate a closeness to the way we experience the world, but its success depends on its presentation and contextualisation; for example how long the shot is in relation to the clips around it. It will only feel long if it is surrounded by shorter clips. It will depend on where in the film the long shot is positioned, what happens in the frame and outside of it, the music etc., etc., etc. And that’s without beginning to talk about the audience, who they are and where they’re sitting.

With everything being so contingent, what dare I say about the audience? Only that much of what I identify as being potential moments of presentness is no-verbal, “essentially human”. While a look into the camera is highly dependent on its context for its specific effect, there is an essentially human, or even pre-human communication present in eye-contact that comes before cultural or verbal differences. Glances, stutters and hesitation are glimpses of our subconscious peeking through the gaps in our speech, revealing who we are. They also mean that wherever you go, you eventually end up in the same place.

I stand on the edge of a rabbit hole of philosophical arguments about the relationship between film and audience, contested between cognitive psychologists and psychoanalysts. Although I find the concept of egotistical and non-egotistical space very interesting, especially in relation to the look back into the camera which I believe has the potential to pierce the viewer's egotistical space, I am reminded that it is dependent on its context so I will save it for another, longer paper, one day in the future. For now I am limiting this enquiry to the creation of filmic material rather than the broader concept of cinematic experience. I return my full focus to presentness in the "now" of the filming. Even if eye contact is not felt through the screen it can create a moment of connection or concentration, or a challenge, between the people in front of and behind the camera.

46 As alluded to on page 3.

47 As Kersti Grunditz Brennan described it in a zoom interview during which her face became frozen in a serious, doubtful expression (hopefully a result of technological issues).
Is it harder to create uncertainty with knowledge that I can control the material in the edit? In fact all uncertainty in film is contrived and therefore requires a suspension of disbelief from the audience. So it's not worth worrying about. It's the uncertainty in the moment of recording that is important.

"Acting is the ability to live truthfully under a given imaginary circumstance".

This famous quote by Sanford Meisner can easily be applied to the performance of a documentary filmmaker.

The two professors who run the documentary processes masters at Stockholm university of the arts are quite different. Erik Gandini broke through internationally with his documentary “Videocracy” which looks at the effects of television media in Berlusconi’s Italy. He is working on a research project with sociologist Roland Paulsen about the future of love. You could claim that Erik looks at people’s behaviour as way of understanding how the world is, and will be. His approach lies closer in some ways to a sociological, anthropological film tradition.

Bengt’s approach appears more psychoanalytical. He’s also looking at people’s behaviour, how people doing things, rather than what they do. I sense he is looking for signs of the subconscious that peak out in action and speech from behind the mask. In 2020, Bengt received a prize from Sweden’s författarförbund. As motivation they describe Bengt’s “…careful way of getting close to people and attentively follow them as much in the most everyday moment as down into the deepest abyss”.48

Very roughly stated, Erik appears to be most interested in how people present themselves and what their behaviour can tell us about the world. Bengt meanwhile, is concerned amongst other things with how the documentary maker can get beyond performance to an inner truth. In acting terminology, could Erik be described as an outside-in and Bengt as an inside-out?

"The art of closeness is about concentration, putting oneself in a state of concentration in readiness for the interview. To be both physically and mentally prepared. A glass dome descends down over

the meeting, now it is only us. It is about listening, following up with questions, (carefully) leading and waiting for answers or stories”.

A fellow student told me that he used Bengt’s interview technique recently on a date. I agree, Bengt’s description of his method reminds me of the feeling of meeting someone you like for the first time. As Tom Ripley describes it in Anthony Minghella’s film, The Talented Mr. Ripley:

RILEY
Don't you put the past in a room, in the cellar, and lock the door and just never go in there? Because that's what I do.

...

Then you meet someone special and all you want to do is toss them the key, say open up, step inside, but you can't because it's dark and there are demons and if anybody saw how ugly it was...

Bengt’s research presupposes an unmediated human nature that the documentary-maker tries to reach through concentration on, and openness to, signs that peak through our masks. He talks about an inner and outer story. The distinction between events: the things we do, are or done to us, and how they affect us and motivate our actions. He reveals that he’s recorded some of his best interviews when hungover (but points out later that this isn’t a sustainable working method).

“There’s a freedom in this weakness, a freedom where feelings and intuition are given freedom to roam. There, we are able to pick up on very subtle signals and undertones from the interviewee. Any question can be asked, prestige and insecurities don’t exist in this condition”.

I am reminded of my (non)meeting at the library and the freedom I felt in defeat, also of Judith Weston writing about the actress Sally Fields in “Directing Actors”.

“As soon as she knows she is going to be in a movie – no matter whether it is a big emotional role or a light-weight comedy – she begins a process that she calls “rawing myself up”. Even of the subject matter of the movie is not painful or difficult, she goes through her emotional and imaginative storage banks to get herself connected to whatever for her is basic about life, to separate herself from mundane concerns… It’s a way of turning off the “automatic pilot” that gets one through the routine of daily life so that she can be “in the moment”.

“Directing Actors” is a guide to help film directors understand techniques and theory of acting so that they can become better at working with actors. Weston’s method, which she bases on Sanford Meisner’s, places emphasis on intuition and listening.

“Listening is the best technique an actor has for anchoring himself in the moment….Listening allows the actors to affect each other and thus to create moments – tiny electrical connections that make the emotional events of a scene”.

I try to mentally replace all the references to the “director” in the book with another “actor”. A documentary director is of course also a director too, but unlike the director of fiction, she is often a visual and / or audible presence in her films. So I am describing her (myself included) as an actor, playing one or more characters.

Despite differences in their relationship to reality, documentary filmmaking and acting share many aims. The style and grammar of documentary film is often employed in fiction to create a sense of realism. The exchange could be perhaps be more mutual. I believe there is benefit to be had from learning from each other. Particularly, it would be interesting to investigate further the insights documentary filmmakers can gain by looking at how actors prepare themselves physically and mentally to act intuitively, in the present.

Writing this text, I’ve worried that it’s too self-centred, too autobiographical. Now that I reach the end, I begin to realise that the self-ransacking perhaps has a purpose if it helps me to define my cha-


acter. This slippery, shifting me, whose perspective I invite the audience to share. By connecting with me I hope that they can share my feelings of doubt, excitement and connection with the people I film.

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