'Modes of Creative Practice' in fiction filmmaking: towards a new Theory of Film Practice.

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This paper was presented following a screening of the practice research short film, *The Burning* (https://uwe.worktribe.com/record.jx?recordid=4707860).

The fact that I am not going to talk about this film **as a text** is the central point of my research. I am not going to discuss how *The Burning* might be read as a historical analogy of social and political conditions in the UK in the Brexit era; nor will I look at the way in which the piece defies cinematic conventions of the representation of the religious conflicts in sixteenth-century England. These were certainly some of the issues that interested me as a screen storyteller when writing and directing this film; as a work of creative practice research, I believe that *The Burning* explores these themes and provides some critical insights. However, my primary research interest is in the creative practices of fiction filmmaking: *The Burning* was an exploration of aspects of a novel Theory of Film Practice that I have developed through my recent research. In this paper, I will present the concept of the 'Modes of Creative Practice', a theoretical construct that provides us with a new form of taxonomy of film. I will explain how the practice research conducted through the making of *The Burning* illustrates a specific 'Mode', a category of 'design-centred' creative practice, showing how historical film production may be aligned within this mode.

The Burning also demonstrates the sector of film production culture that is the focus of my research: my work looks specifically at mainstream narrative fiction filmmaking, rather than other areas of screen creativity such as experimental film.

The commonalities of directors' creative work seem most apparent: they all make screen stories using script, actors, camera and microphone, and the processes of postproduction. There is a linear progression of the stages of film

production that seems logical and is adopted by most filmmakers. Within those stages there are standard creative processes, and broadly familiar collaborative relationships within the creative team that, led by the director, moves the project through preproduction, production and into postproduction. So within mainstream film production, it is possible to describe a norm of creative practice. Directors are introduced to these filmmaking processes during their training; when entering the screen industries, they are required to adopt the accepted procedures, workflow and structures of decision-making that have become custom-and-practice in this creative field.

Yet it is abundantly clear to those who work <u>with</u> directors that there are also starkly different approaches to the craft. First Assistant Directors, who collaborate with a range of different directors during their careers, will attest to this. Sometimes the variations in practice are based on the weight of interest that a director puts on a particular aspect of filmmaking; sometimes the differences may stem from the idiosyncratic nature of the individual concerned.

But understanding variations in filmmaking practice on an individual, director-specific level is not useful to us. We need to identify patterns of difference that can be sorted into coherent schemes of creative practice.

Where do the differences in creative practice stem from? Decisions on the form and character of filmmaking practices may be made very early in a fiction film project. For a director looking at a film script for the first time, the different requirements in terms of their practice will often be immediately apparent. If the script is for a Sci Fi or Fantasy film, the emphasis of the creative practice employed will be significantly different than if the film project is a contemporary realist drama. The director must consider what personal skills will be required of them in order to translate the script to the screen. All such considerations, discussed at the very early stages of a movie's Pre-Preproduction will lay the groundwork for the type of film practice – the Creative Mode - that will be used in the making of a film. In some film production cultures, such as Germany, a period of 'Pre-Preproduction' is common practice, when such fundamental decisions are made by the small team initiating a film project.

Choices in how a film is made are central to the concept of 'Modes of Creative Practice'. A key assumption here is that, in the making of every fiction film, directors and their teams can choose to adopt particular creative and organisational strategies in order to achieve desired creative outcomes for their film. Film practice is a process of creative decision-making that may be manipulated and altered according to the intentions of the filmmakers. Not all filmmakers think closely about this, but some pay great attention to the nature of their practice.

The 'Performance-Centred Mode'

The first example that I can present of a distinct Mode of Creative Practice comes from an analysis of the creative methods of those directors who prioritise their collaboration with actors above other elements of the directing process. Such directors are useful in developing a Theory of Film Practice because their methods of fiction filmmaking provide clear archetypes of difference. Prominent in international cinema are: Mike Leigh in the UK; in Australia David Marchand; John Cassavetes and Jake Doremus in the US; and less well-known directors such as Federico Godfrid in Argentina and Blandine Lenoir in France. Some of their working methods are famous – Mike Leigh's months and months of devising characters together with his actors, for instance, has generated what's known as the Mike Leigh Method. There are fascinatingly original ways in which these filmmakers go about making their films, most obviously in the casting and rehearsal stages, often adopting a system of devised scriptwriting that includes the actors in the development of the screenplay. Due to the clear similarities in these filmmakers' practices it is possible to group together their methods and identify a reliable category of the 'Performance-Centred Mode'.

Roberto Rossellini: Neorealist film practice and the 'Design-Centred Mode'

The theory of 'Modes of Creative Practice' does not propose that an individual film director will create work only within one mode. Instead, the Mode is something that a director can choose and manipulate to support their creative intentions. I will elaborate here with the example of Roberto Rossellini: we will see that the qualities of his filmmaking practice during his famous Neorealist period were significantly different from the 'Mode of Creative Practice' that the director adopted later on in his

life, when he made historical biographies such as *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966)*.* During his Neorealist period, the authenticity of the profilmic moment was centrally important to Rossellini and his filmmaking practice focused on the achievement of this goal. In the making of *Stromboli* (1950), the poverty of the film's subject led to Rossellini deliberately making his film cast and crew live like peasants while shooting on the remote island, staying in accommodation without plumbing; he forced the film's Hollywood star, Ingrid Bergman, to work without a hairdresser or any assistants to help prepare her for scenes. Rossellini's attitude towards performance was also focused on realist authenticity. To achieve this quality of realist performance, Rossellini carefully deployed deliberate tactics with his cast. In her DVD commentary on *Journey to Italy* (1954), Laura Mulvey notes how Rossellini's need to achieve his realist intention led him to provoke and shock his actors:

> Rossellini took realism to extreme behind the scenes of his films, always trying to pre-empt artifice, fiction and conscious performance. Instead of conventional instruction and direction, actors were left at a loss infront of the camera and then secretly manipulated off camera. (2003)

What is significant is the care and deliberation that we see in Rossellini's adoption of approaches towards the creative process of making his films. He understood that the nature of his filmmaking practice would profoundly influence the creative qualities of his films.

In the making of his historical films a few decades later, design was brought to the fore in Rossellini's filmmaking practice. The subject matter of these films required Rossellini to develop tools of film practice that would have been inconceivable during the Neorealist period. He clearly adopted principles of what I have called the 'Design-Centred Mode' in order to create his historical films for the Italian broadcaster, RAI. His preproduction practice became dominated by research into the details of the period of his dramas. One of Rossellini's collaborators was his son, Gil, who contributed an interview about this period of his father's work for the BBC *Arena* programme:

He started with very accurate research. The movies would start three years from before they were shot. Everything in the movie, from the dialogues to the minimal details of the costumes or the food they were eating, came from historical documents. (1990)

Such an emphasis on historical authenticity is a familiar concern within this branch of design-centred filmmaking. In films such as *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966), the importance of design detail in the visual language of the film is integral to the narrative itself: the new king uses regal spectacle as a strategy to enforce his authority.

Elements of the camera work in the historical films likewise show the adoption of new creative practices in Rossellini's filmmaking.   The Neorealist films had sought to represent the profilmic event with unadorned authenticity. However, during the making of *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV*, techniques such as the 'Shüfftan mirror' are used, which enable one part of the frame to be a reflection of a model placed at a 45-degree angle behind the camera. The film can thus represent a combination of the actors' performances infront of the camera, with historically credible design elements prepared behind it. The overt illusionism of such highly-skilled techniques steps outside the very ideology of a Neorealist filmmaker, but is an exceptionally useful tool to the director working in the Design-Centred Mode.

Exploring the Design-Centre Mode through practice research

With the making of *The Burning*, I chose to investigate further the nature of the Design-Centred Mode through a strategy of practice research. The nature of this form of filmmaking was new to me, and I considered this to be an advantage. My own background is a television and film director working in contemporary drama, often rooted in social and political realities. In making a short film dominated by design considerations, I understood that the novelty of this form to my experiences of film practice would provide me with the perspective of an outsider, able to question and explore new techniques. During my professional career working in contemporary realist genres, my experience of production design was that despite its significance in the mise-en-scene it does not dominate the director's attention. I was

aware that the reverse must be the case in other genres such as fantasy and sci fi, as well as Historical Film. The practice research in making *The Burning* enabled me to experience the different demands on directors during the creation of films in which design is a central priority for the production. I will use some of my reflections on the making of *The Burning* and relate these to the practice of some leading filmmakers working in the Design-Centred Mode.

In mainstream cinema, the production of a Historical Film is characterised by a high budget, with resources focused on the requirements of the art department. This is a feature of all films in the Design-Centred Mode, as they typically require a very high level of artifice to create their cinematic worlds. For the making of a short film such as *The Burning,* on a very low budget, there would be very different conditions of production. I was able to bypass the costs of set construction by persuading the Weald and Downland Outdoor Museum in West Sussex to let me use their resources as a location. The farmhouse that you saw in the film is the real thing, built just two decades before the year in which *The Burning* is set (1559) and preserved by the museum in its valley near the south coast of England. The generosity of the museum allowed me to focus my attention on the film's costumes: there are eighteen individually designed and created costumes in *The Burning* – a remarkably high number for a short film. I spend a lot of time telling my film production students that the element of film design that has most impact on the audience is costume. However, I was unprepared for the amount of time and energy that this issue demanded from me as the film's director. The creation of the costumes was probably the biggest task of the small film's preproduction. Significantly, it involved a huge amount of time in research, the amassing of knowledge, before progress could be made.

Such an emphasis on preproduction research is universal in the Design-Centred Mode. To take a mainstream example: Guillermo Del Toro's positioning of design at the forefront of his creative practice has been widely recounted. For the production of *The Shape of Water* (2017), he chose designer Paul D. Austerberry (who subsequently received an Oscar for his work on the film). Austerberry (interviewed by Julie Miller, 2017), describes the director's central concerns when they began work on the movie:

'The first day that we had a production office, Guillermo brought in a huge box full of Benjamin Moore paint samples—3,500 colors total', remembered Austerberry. 'We literally went through every single one of them, because Guillermo is very aware of and specific about color—with costumes, the sets, everything. We went through the colors and he would say, 'Elisa's color,' 'Strickland's color,' 'Giles's color.' By the end, we had picked 100 colors from this box of 3,500. (Miller 2017)

Austerberry describes a director with an unusually keen attention to design, however, despite Del Toro's primary creative role, individuals in his design team play a much-enlarged role in creative decision-making compared with other departments. One of the key features of the Design-Centred Mode is this shift in the locus of creative authorship. This was my experience in making *The Burning*, in which the costume designer, Sophia Johnson, became my closest and most important collaborator amongst the members of my creative team. This re-centering of creative authority has long been the case in Design Centre filmmaking. The leading British director from the mid-twentieth century, Michael Powell, whose most celebrated films, such as *Black Narcissus* (1947, production designer Alfred Junge) or *The Red Shoes* (1948, production designer Hein Heckroth) were triumphs of studio art departments, acknowledged them as more significant than himself in the creation of his films:

It is not generally recognised by the public that the most genuinely creative member of a film unit, if the author of the original story and screenplay is excluded, is the art director…in the film world the producer and director and cameraman are so full of themselves that it is not sufficiently acknowledged that the art director is the creator of those miraculous images up there on the big screen. (2000: 343)

We must remember the historical context in which Powell was working: the most lavishly designed film of his era was *Gone With The Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), in which the production designer, William Cameron Mackenzie, performed most of the director's roles in preproduction long before Fleming was hired to helm the picture. In Powell's view, to be 'genuinely creative' on a film set is to be the person who creates that set, and all the meaning within its rich visual texture. For him, the

role of the director in a design-centred production is different from our usual understanding of the job: while they remain responsible for performance issues and storytelling, in terms of the visual elements that dominate such a film the director is a coordinator and a consultant, awe-struck by the work of those that they theoretically command.

In today's cinema, the most prominent example of this shifting of creative relationships in the Design-Centred Mode is that of Catherine Martin and Baz Luhrman. Oscar-laden Martin is one of the most significant filmmakers in Australia today. As 'Production and Costume Designer', she has collaborated with Luhrman throughout their careers. They identify a key shift in their creative practice that differentiates their working methods from the production culture of fiction filmmaking. Martin is involved in providing creative input straight after the moment of conception by co-writers Luhrman and Craig Pearce. Luhrmann emphasises how this differs from the norm of mainstream film practice:

> In general, production design tends to be something that happens after there's a script. What's different with our process is we begin that process as the story is being written. (Bazmark 2013)

This is a highly unusual alteration of the norms of screenplay development and unique to the Design-Centred Mode. Significantly, it gives a range of responsibilities to the production designer that are not encountered in other creative modes. The involvement of the design team during the script stage was not a feature of my practice research in making *The Burning*. However, my experience of creating this film has led me to understand the logic of adopting the Luhrman-Martin approach to production design when working in the Design-Centred Mode.

The best illustration of the shift in creative authority in the work of these Design-Centred filmmakers is that Martin now takes producer responsibilities and credit alongside the director, other executives and line producers. There are few production designers with such a broad spread of creative and business responsibility for their films, and Martin's position is achieved because the Luhrmann approach to filmmaking practice is so emphatically within the Design-Centred Mode.

Conclusion

By identifying variations in filmmaking practices and grouping them together, we can build the basis for a very useful Theory of Film Practice. I have analysed three 'Modes of Creative Practice' - the Design-Centred Mode, the Performance-Centred Mode and the Social Realist Mode. My research shows that these categories of film practice are conceptually valid because we can identify unique ways in which directors and their teams work in these modes. While there are commonalities across all forms of filmmaking, each Mode will contain methods and approaches that are unique to its category. What emerges is a loose taxonomy of film practice. Further modes may also be identified, conceptual groupings that define the ways in which filmmakers work. An important point to establish is that I do not suggest that the proposed Modes are exclusive, indeed it will be commonplace that they interact and overlap with each other. This theory is not prescriptive, it describes and analyses fiction film practice to help us understand it better. In this research, what I hope to establish is a conceptual approach to filmmaking that will be a useful tool in the theoretical analysis of the production cultures in fiction filmmaking, as well as being a concept that helps film practitioners better define their craft.

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