

Conference paper:

Practice as Research in the Making of Historical Film Drama, presented to the 'Out of Practice' Conference, University of Birmingham, June 8th 2016

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My PhD uses both practice-as-research and theoretical methodologies to investigate the strategies of film directors in the creation of independent feature films. The problem that my thesis addresses is a simple one: that the term 'Film Director' is much too simplistic to describe the extremely varied creative practices seen in the making of films. The central chapters of my PhD will look at different forms of practice – what I call 'Creative Modes of Production' - adopted by film directors, in an effort to develop a differentiated understanding of the practice of film directing.

So my concerns are with questions around the practice of making film. My research does not take film as text, so departing from the many avenues of film studies developed during the decades of Grand Theory. Instead I look at film as a process of creative decisions, which lead to the artwork that we view (and hear) on screen. The theoretical background of my research approach is rooted in the style-based film criticism developed by Victor Perkins, Douglas Pye and my supervisor, John Gibbs. As someone coming to research after a career in film and television drama, this approach is inspiring. These are scholars and authors within the Academy who take a central interest in filmmaking practice. Their critical starting point is the decision-making undertaken by the filmmakers: Gibbs and Pye write that

Every decision taken in making a film... develops the narrative and thematic web. Every shot is a view of something, every cut is from one specific view to another, every costume decision bears on considerations of character, situation, fashion context, colour design, and more...all this decision making is material and it has material effects on our experience of the film.

Gibbs, J and Pye, D (eds) (2005) *Style and Meaning: studies in the detailed analysis of film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press)

I have recently completed a Short Film made with the intention of investigating aspects of creative practice linked to one of the Modes of Production central to my research. I have defined this as the 'Design-centred Mode'. Within this mode I am looking at filmmaking practice which gives a central role to the Art Department, Costume and Makeup departments in creating the film's distinct visual world. The mode is particularly significant in the production of films within certain genres, such as SciFi and Fantasy, as well as non-genre traditions such as Historical Film.

In my paper today, I am focussing on the practice of costume design, and the role of costume in the semiotics of historical drama. As a filmmaker and scholar, I consider the clothes that the actors wear to be the most significant element of a film's design. This is because the spectator spends more time watching the performers than any other element of a film; costumes and hair are therefore observed continuously while the actors are on screen. Cinematic meaning is intensely linked to film costume choices. Just by way of illustrating the point, I will give you an excerpt of the opening of my short film, which is entitled *The Burning*.



George Watkins as Richard, with Elizabeth Morton

Costume is the first visual indicator that the film is set in a historical period. The first images of the film are of forest: familiar scenes that could be

contemporary. The narrator has told us that we are in 1558, but we have no evidence of historical context until the extended steadicam shot finds its human subject – a woodsman at work. He is wearing a simple ‘doublet and hose’ in browns and greens, and a green wool hat: indications of his class as well as confirmation of the film’s historical context. His costume **must** be immediately believable to the spectator, otherwise the film suffers from the frequent problem of historical film, emphasised in the title to Mel Brooks’s 1993 film, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*.



Comedies such as that were never made with the intention of creating a convincing historical world on screen. But both the title and content of Mel Brooks’s film emphasise the potential pitfall of historical drama: that the spectator observes the mise-en-scene and finds it impossible to believe in what they are watching. All serious historical film works to overcome this believability gap. Filmmakers are therefore inevitably drawn into a discourse around the idea of *authenticity*, which I will be developing and examining in this paper.

Authenticity is a broad term which can be deployed at many levels of film analysis. Ulrike Schwab describes how

In a film, authenticity can be achieved on various levels: that of events, of the visual rendering of sites and of thematic quintessence.

(2002: *Authenticity and Ethics in 'The Third Man'*)

My research interest is in the decision-making of the filmmaker, which begins with intentions laid down in the project's earliest stages. During the preparation of my film, *The Burning*, I became highly conscious of how a need for authenticity was embedded in my intentions for this piece of drama.

My original story looks at the passions and politics of Reformation England, but deliberately locates the drama far from the setting used in mainstream cinema: instead of the Tudor court, this script is set entirely in a small village in southern England. As a writer, this was a core intention: to dramatise the issues of the Reformation and to present them as emotionally central to ordinary people's beliefs, not part of a power game amongst factions of the ruling elite. This motivation had a profound effect on the rationale for costume design in the film. Our intention was to harness costume as a device which would:

- locate the drama of Reformation politics in a naturalistic rural setting;
- emphasise the film's characters as linked to their environment, part of a society rooted in the countryside that surrounds them.

The clothes worn by the actors in '*The Burning*' should fit the class and family position of their characters and appear real to the period. My intention was to create an impression in my audience of true authenticity.

This concern for authenticity is common to many filmmakers working on historical dramas. During the making of the political thriller *All the President's Men* (1976), a film about the two journalists who broke the Watergate scandal that eventually brought down President Nixon, director Alan Pakula built an exact replica of *The Washington Post* newsroom in Los Angeles, in Burbank studio. He was so obsessed by the need for authenticity that he had genuine *Washington Post* newsroom garbage taken from the newspaper's offices and shipped to the film studio to fill wastebaskets on the set.



If a filmmaker is prepared to deploy large resources, in this case shipping refuse from Washington DC to California, for the provision of design detail that the film's audience will never see on screen, then we can see how significant the struggle for authenticity becomes in the work of major film directors.

Some writers have rightly commented that a heightened-detail approach to the Production Design of historical film has been used as a strategy to promote the marketing of the film. In this paper, I am very interested in an important strategy employed by filmmakers when creating historical film, which is the struggle for the 'authentication' of the film to the audience, in which the filmmaker will provide enough historically authentic detail to persuade the spectator to accept the validity of the cinematic world depicted. Sarah Street has written about how the accurate detail of historical film costumes can be a part of these 'authenticating processes' of creating the cinematic world (2001: 30).

So if authenticity was a central principle in the reproduction of *The Burning*, my practice research looked at what factors reinforce or disrupt this intention. A specific example concerns decisions on costume for the film. In Tudor England, it was culturally inconceivable not to wear a hat. This cultural habit

was also enshrined in law: the statute prescribing it said that anyone seen without a hat – the famous ‘Statute Cap’ for males – would face a heavy fine.



Historical evidence shows examples of men being fined several pounds, which was a very heavy punishment at a time when the average wage was little more than two pounds per year. Yet in the traditions of Historical Film set in the period, representations frequently show bareheaded Tudors. In a sequence in Shekhar Kapur’s *Elizabeth: the Golden Age* (2007), Cate Blanchett appears as the queen, bareheaded with long, flowing red hair.



It is historic nonsense: the Tudors considered hair to be exceptionally erotic; women, like men, suffered strict restrictions in relation to head-covering.

Elizabeth could never have been seen in public like this. Such a queen would have sexually aroused and enraged her subjects. But we can understand why Kapur presents this image: Blanchett looks stunning, he communicates to the spectator an understanding of why Elizabeth's people were inspired to follow her into battle.

In my practice, I was resolved to confound this inauthentic convention of Historical Film. In preproduction for *The Burning*, I would put all my actors in the right sort of head covering. To ensure historical accuracy, I organised a workshop for my costume department and invited one of the country's leading experts on Tudor clothing, Dr. Cathy Flower-Bond, as a consultant.



We made precisely authentic Tudor hats - the famous 'Statute Cap': round, floppy and made of wool cloth. However, despite being confident in the authenticity of the hats, as a filmmaker I was presented with a problem: to show all my male characters in these caps would make them look a bit like a parade of academics at a degree ceremony. My film's protagonist is a desperately serious man, consumed by grief and rage: I could not imagine the audience engaging with his story if there were a link in their minds between this ordinary farmer and a contemporary university professor. So I was forced to compromise my goal of presenting an authentic image of ordinary people in Tudor England. My protagonist wears a very simple wool beanie. I have

joined the ranks of filmmakers who have presented *inauthentic* images of the past in order to better serve their narrative.

Jonathan STUBBS has written extensively on historical film and comments, and perhaps I should have listened to his wise words:

“Any film that dramatizes or restages the past from the perspective of the present necessarily strikes a balance between fact and fiction”.

Stubbs, J (2013) *Historical Film: a critical introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic) p17

In my practice, I have felt this tension, a struggle between the pursuit of historical authenticity and the narrative requirements of film storytelling, which can lead the filmmaker to the part-fictionalising of events, costumes and design.

However, the best outcomes of practice-as-research are the unexpected ones. In my mind, this is one of the most valuable reasons for undertaking our form of research: if we follow theoretical research models, the process is bound to a development of linked ideas – the chance of arriving at unlinked outcomes, derived from unintended outside influences, is rare. Two examples from the practice of costume-making for *The Burning* demonstrate how unexpected influences engaged with the creative struggle of embedding authenticity within the film’s design.

In the early stages of preproduction, I conceived a rationale for the colours of the costumes that would emphasise the closeness of this community to the landscape around them. The characters in ‘The Burning’ would wear clothes in light and dark browns, creams, ochre, and yellow. This was consistent with the natural colour dyes available in sixteenth century England: birchwood bark was used to give browns; alderbuckthorn provided yellow, tansy could be used for lime-green, elderberry was used to dye cloth a pale purple. I wanted two exceptions to the colour scheme: firstly, the Altarboy would wear red, to emphasise his ecclesiastical upbringing; second, the Protestant lay preacher,

Thomas, would wear black. In Tudor England, both of these colours represented wealth. Red cloth was restricted under the Sumptuary Laws, and was dyed using Madder (the plant, *Rubia tinctorum*). Black was a rare colour only worn by churchmen and the elite; later in the seventeenth century, it would become a hallmark of the Puritans, who were mostly drawn from the richer merchant classes – my character, Thomas, would appear to the film's audience to be a forerunner of these intransigent Christians.

For my film's Costume Designers, it was straightforward to dye linen red for the Altarboy's costume. I volunteered to dye the wool cloth for Thomas's costume black: taking several metres of our pale cream cloth and quantities of Dylon's black fabric dye, I followed the procedure of dyeing, which involved several hours of churning the cloth to make it absorb the colour. However, the result when finished was a pale blue. I repeated the work with a fresh batch of black dye, but after many hours of churning, rinsing and drying, the wool cloth was no more than a darker shade of blue. I repeated it again, only to achieve a rich midnight blue, which was still far from my intended black. At this point, I discussed the problem with our Historical Advisor, Cathy Flower-Bond. She explained to me that my painstaking work in trying to dye cloth black was exactly the experience of sixteenth century textile artisans. There was no black dye available in that period: to achieve the colour, Tudor workers would use blue and repeat the dyeing process with this colour nine times. Just as in my experience, the colour of the cloth would darken with each dyeing. This was why black cloth was highly expensive, so becoming a symbol of privilege and status for Tudor society. Now I was able to look at my own midnight-blue wool cloth not as a failure of my work in helping the Costume Design department, but as a useful contribution to the film's realism.



Actor Andy Clift, in costume fitting for the role of 'Thomas'

Thomas is a wealthy man of the village who aspires to wear the black clothing of a higher class, but can still only afford a cheaper colour. The midnight blue represents his aspiration; we can imagine that the next generations of his family will wear the black-and-white of the Puritans, although *he* has not yet reached this status. As a filmmaker, I embraced the accidental realism of the cloth that I had dyed, delighted with the authenticity of my work.

My second example of practice delivering very unexpected outcomes was with one of the minor characters. For the role of Judith, the poor servant of the household in *'The Burning'*, I cast Jorjana Ingham, an actor who brought an intense energy to her preparation for the role, and an enthusiasm for the historical research required in developing her character. Ingham's professional training is in the 'Method' – an approach to preparing a character which has much overlap with our discussion of authenticity - and she sought any means possible to understand the social and cultural background of Judith. She joined the Costume-Making Workshop led by Dr.Cathy Flower-Bond; having developed the knowledge and sewing skills required, Ingham

proposed to me that she should make her own costume. Authenticity was part of her rationale: a poor widow such as Judith would have made all her own clothes in the sixteenth century. This was a request that a sensitive Director could not refuse: my working relationship with actors is to encourage them in whichever approach they choose to create depth in their character. If Ingham believed that sewing her costume would help prepare her performance, I was reluctant to deny her the opportunity. This seemed to me to be a relatively safe decision: for reasons described earlier, the costume design throughout the film was limited to the styles and materials established in the Sumptuary Laws, so I knew that Ingham would deliver a costume that followed the necessary design. However, I was not prepared for the result of her limited skills as a seamstress. Judith's costume looks quite different from the other characters' in the film: it is misshapen, unevenly stitched, lopsided and too big.



But while my Costume Designers were dismayed by the quality of Ingham's work, for me this costume was perfect: its rough and amateurish quality

emphasises the poverty of the old woman; Ingham's body looks shrunken within the oversized 'kyrtle', as if she has lived a life of hunger. Ingham's intervention brought unexpected visual meaning to her character's costume. Prior to her request to make her costume, I had not discussed with the designers the idea of varying the actual quality of craft in the making of our different characters' clothing. It was only Ingham's participation in the *'The Burning'* costume-making that unexpectedly added a new layer of meaning within the film's mise-en-scène, some were well-made, others very poorly stitched. Most importantly, the actor's intervention brought unexpected authenticity to part of the costume design for the film.

Practice-as-research has been an essential methodology for my project. The findings that I have discussed today open up very important avenues for theoretical thought, and not just connected to the issue of authenticity which I have presented today. This rich seam of outcomes contributes to other major issues in film studies, such as authorship. Students of film have an ongoing fascination with the locus of decision-making – my practice illustrates how creative decision-making slips between the hands of different collaborators in unexpected ways, but with extremely productive outcomes. To recap Gibbs and Pye:

all this decision making is material and it has material effects on our experience of the film.

I am convinced that to fully understand the creative decision-making processes in film, practice-as-research is an essential tool.