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Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.

Northumbria
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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Type of output:
Digital/Visual
Media (Film)

by
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Left: *Rules of Engagement*
(film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

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SUMMARY

Rules of Engagement is a 22 minute long film developed from collected stories of uncomfortable or failed social situations. The film consists of three vignettes depicting everyday scenarios wherein individuals come up against unwritten or tacit social protocols.

The research aimed to explore unwritten rules of social interaction through participatory processes. Using moving image to highlight seemingly insignificant everyday interactions, societal norms and notions of outsiderism, *Rules of Engagement* explored formal hybridity in screen-based practices to exploit the tension between cinematic conventions of narrative drama and other forms of representing social experience through the moving image.

The research project reflects Stenbom's own experience of misunderstanding the social codes that create cohesion as a Swedish national living in the UK. *Rules of Engagement* examines the rituals of everyday life, the innate need to perform the roles expected of us as part of social order and the drive towards - and consequences of - breaking prevailing social protocols.

The screenplay was developed through recorded and transcribed interviews. The film has the look and structure of conventional narrative drama but has no dialogue thereby creating a deliberate sense of things being staged, unnatural or not quite right, feeding into the tension between reality and representations of it.

The film premiered in 2018 as part of a UK tour of Stenbom's work and has had further presentations including London Short Film Festival and Innsbruck International. The film was awarded runner-up in BAFTSS Awards in Moving Image category in May 2020. The project was funded by Newcastle University Institute for Creative Arts Practice and Arts Council England.

INTRODUCTION

"A beautifully shot series of [vignettes] that yield rich sociological insight into the power and complexities of social protocol in group behaviour. Subtle and restrained in its treatment, the [vignettes] nonetheless paint a disturbing, almost dystopic, picture of social groups, be it families, work settings, or social groups through everyday / routine interactions. The [vignettes] are underpinned by a formally interesting method that problematises the attempts to draw fixed lines between documentary and fiction. A well-articulated research statement supports the practice, and makes the case for working across boundaries of moving image practice and narrative film."

Jury's motivation for runner up position in Best Practice Research Portfolio
2020 BAFTSS Moving Image (Documentary & Image)

"It seems I wasn't the only one who felt a rising sense of anxiety throughout the evening; a quick glance around the [auditorium] saw the occasional clenched fist, nails dug into armrests, and the shrill of nervous laughter"

Nicole Mullen, review in The Crack of *Rules of Engagement* Screening and Q&A at Tyneside Cinema

Left: *Rules of Engagement* (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

Below: *Rules of Engagement* installed at *Innsbruck International Contemporary Biennial of the arts*

Below: *Rules of Engagement* (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The aim of the research was to create a film using a hybrid screen-based approach and participatory processes to highlight seemingly insignificant everyday interactions, societal norms and notions of outsiderness whilst simultaneously exploiting the gap between cinematic representation and reality.

The research collected anecdotes of experiences of outsiderness from individuals who identified as 'outsiders' and produced a short film based upon them that had the look of conventional narrative drama but lacked dialogue and a discernible story arc to highlight the alienating impact of social conventions and unspoken rules of interaction. Actors were cast who identified with such scenarios in order to explore how actors' own experiences could be incorporated into the film's deliberate figuring of social awkwardness and individual alienation.

Above and Right:
Rules of Engagement (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

CONTEXT

Rules of Engagement was originally developed for a national tour of screenings and talks about Stenbom's broader practice. The project received funds from Arts Council England and NICAP (Newcastle University Institute for Creative Arts Practice). The total budget for the project was £25,000.

Right: *Rules of Engagement*
(film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

Rules of Engagement is situated within the broad field of artists' film in its approach and methodology. It travels across the disciplinary boundaries of art and cinema and thus evades narrow definition. Curator and producer Sarah Perks writes "*What usually distinguishes artist film from more traditional notions of filmmaking […]*
is not just the fact that it's made by a self-declared visual artist, but also that it is some way artistic or experimental" (Perks, 2015). Another example of a broad definition is found in Tate film's programme outline, which states that it "*brings together works by artists and filmmakers who seek to challenge the conventions of the moving image and to examine its evolving role in visual culture*" (Lissoni, 2019).

Rules of Engagement contributes to artists' film in being experimental in its process-heavy approach and in its interrogation of the boundary between reality and film reality through a hybrid use of documentary and fiction methods.

Right: *Rules of Engagement*
(film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

The thematic exploration of *Rules of Engagement* deals with unwritten social protocols and how these protocols either result in a sense of belonging or create notions of 'outsiderdom'. Sociological and anthropological theory on rules, rituals and roles in the everyday social contexts offered a framework from which to approach the interviews, and later on, to inform the development of the screenplay.

For example, initial conversations with potential participants were framed around Irving Goffman's theories on social protocols in everyday life and the innate need to perform the roles expected of us. (1959)

The work of Zygmunt Bauman, who writes on being constrained by the 'rules' of social interaction and of the consequent punishments for breaking with conformity (1990) was used to locate reoccurring behavioural patterns in the recorded transcripts which, in turn, influenced the development of the storylines in the film. For example, in *Rules of Engagement* each character breaks with conformity and becomes ostracised as a result.

Anthropologist Eric W. Rothenbuhler frames everyday social interaction as ritualistic and emphasises its importance to notions of self and social order. (1998) Rothenbuhler's theory informed the structure of the screenplay in that each scene was built around ritualistic interaction going awry.

Right: *Rules of Engagement*
(film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

METHODS AND PROCESSES

The idea for this project came out of the aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum whereby Stenbom became acutely aware of her own outsiderdom and of the unwritten codes that create social cohesion. As a result of this experience Stenbom began to source accounts of everyday experiences from individuals identifying as 'outsiders' to understand the connection between social protocols and notions of belonging in the context of seemingly insignificant everyday interactions.

Stenbom recorded accounts through conversations with invited participants. The conversations took place in informal settings to allow for a free-flowing exchange. Participants were prepared prior to the conversations by sharing an outline of the concepts explored.

The recordings uncovered scenarios whereby individuals came up against tacit social protocols in work, domestic and leisure contexts. The scenarios ranged from an excruciating return to an outgrown family unit, a failure to integrate in a new alternative scene or blend in with ultra-conservative colleagues.
In total, eight conversations were recorded, but only three of these were used as material for the film. The selected recordings were then transcribed and used to structure the screenplay.

In several instances, participants used references from film and TV to describe their experiences. For example, a medical laboratory facility that emulated *2001 - A Space Odyssey* or a dive bar that could have been taken out of David Fincher's *Fight Club*. These references were used to inform the cinematography and production design of the film.

Each participant, who contributed to the final film, had an opportunity to read the script before pre-production began. Furthermore, the participants were also invited to view the work before its first public screening.

Above: *Fight Club*
(Reference still)
1999

Below: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Reference still)
1968

To find the principal cast, a call went out seeking performers who identified with the scenarios in the screenplay. The idea was not to find actors to play set roles, but to find performers who were willing to insert their own experiences into the scenarios. Conversations with the cast before filming resulted in alterations to the screenplay to accommodate their experiences.

To highlight unwritten social protocols and highlight the relationship between ritual and unspoken communication all dialogue was removed from the scripted scenarios leaving deliberate gaps in the interactions represented in the scenes.

The project was developed, written, directed and edited by Stenbom alongside creative collaborators cinematographer Emma Dalesman, musician Ziad Jabero and production designer Mike McLoughlin. *Rules of Engagement* was filmed over the course of 6 days at locations in Gateshead and Northumberland in February, 2017.

Above: *Rules of Engagement*
(production stills) 2017

DISSEMINATION

Rules of Engagement first screened during a national tour in February 2018: the tour went to Regent Street Cinema (London), CCA (Glasgow), Tyneside Cinema (Newcastle-upon-Tyne), The Maltings (Berwick Upon Tweed) and The Tetley (Leeds). Each screening had an invited host including film programmers Philip Ilson and Peter Taylor, art curator Bryoni Bond and writers Michael Pattison and Harriet Warman.

Since the premiere, the work has publicly shown nationally and internationally, including the official selection at London Short Film Festival and screenings at *CineKasimanwa* film festival in the Philippines, both in January 2019.

Rules of Engagement was exhibited in March 2020 at *Innsbruck International Contemporary Biennial of the Arts* in Austria.

The film was awarded runner-up in the 2020 BAFTSS (British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies) Awards in category Moving Image (Documentary & Image) (Best Practice Research Portfolio). https://www.baftss.org/awards-2020

Below: In conversation with Philip Ilson at Regent Street Cinema 2018

Selected links:

- Innsbruck International 2020:
  http://2020.innsbruckinternational.com/artist/cecilia-stenbom/

- Feature in Narc Magazine, February 2018:
  https://narcmagazine.com/profile-cecilia-stenbom/

- London Short Film Festival, 2019:
  https://www.curzoncinemas.com/film-info/lsff-2019-crossed-wires

- Bdaily:
  https://bdaily.co.uk/articles/2018/01/24/award-winning-filmmaker-to-debut-new-short-alongside-other-works-at-the-tetley

- What's On Glasgow:
  http://www.whatsonglasgow.co.uk/event/056213-in-conversation-with-cecilia-stenbom/

- Regent Street Cinema:
  https://www.regentstreetcinema.com/programme/in-conversation-with-cecilia-stenbom/

- The Maltings:
  http://m.maltingsberwick.co.uk/events/eventsandtalks/3645

- Workplace Foundation:
  https://workplacefoundation.art/artists/45-cecilia-stenbom/works/#/image_popup/artwork10312/

Below: Selected social media mentions

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Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books

Lissoni, Andrea (2018) *Tate Film*.
Available at https://www.tate.org.uk/art/tate-film
(Accessed: 25.10.2019)

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Perks, Sarah (2015) 'There's no place like HOME: (re)locating artist film' Future Now York St Mary, 26 March – 31 May 2015. [Exhibition catalogue]

Rothenbuhler, E.W. (1998)
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Below: *Rules of Engagement* (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

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