

Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

BOSC





Type of output:
Digital/Visual
Media (Film)

by
Ian Cottage

Cover:

A graded still from *Bosc*.

Left:

Alex Elliot filming in the
foothills of the Pyrenees.

Bosc film:

<https://vimeo.com/315409022>

Password: BK1

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SUMMARY

Cottage's *Bosc* investigates how a feature film can be created by blurring the lines between development and production and combining the two stages so that the development phase runs throughout the entire process. It explores ways to create an 82 minute feature film in a shorter time period than is typical, on a limited budget and yet result in stronger central performances enabling stronger central performances.

Using a specific location and related stories as a starting point, a series of workshops with two actors was organized in May 2015. The work focused on building characters through discussions, personal stories and anecdotes, and role play and improvisation. A basic narrative emerged which was used as a framework for the film shoot. *Bosc's* complete period of filming took place from 15th May to 11th August 2015 – three and a half months from conception to production.

Right:
Exploring character
through improvisation.
Photo credit: Ian Cottage



The research drew upon the work of film directors John Cassavetes and Mike Leigh, where the improvisatory production of character by participant actors is foregrounded, as well as upon the devised theatre practice of Robert Lepage's production company, Ex Machina

Such processes of creation from the history of film and theatre production were explored further during the filming of *Bosc* (Catalan for 'forest') in a remote location in Northern Spain. Cottage worked with the actors to devise new storylines to enhance and transform the narrative and the actors responded to and performed with local people. The work was experimental by nature: a significant part of the story was unscripted, there was no recce or formal casting of locals, and the shoot was restricted to a limited time period without support. The process was therefore both spontaneous and precarious, however a feature film, *Bosc*, was created.

The film subsequently received Northern Film and Media funding for bespoke mentorship towards online distribution, and premiered at Aesthetica in 2019, a BAFTA recognized film festival. It is currently represented by the British Council at international film festivals.



Above:
A graded still from *Bosc*. Over 60 hours of
material was shot in 14 days.

INTRODUCTION

The research examines whether it is possible to grow a film narrative “organically” as opposed to within more standard production formulas, so it can be properly responsive to site. It also explores how, by keeping crew to a minimum, a director can ensure a more intuitive form of filmmaking, facilitating more intimate and in-depth performances.

Bosc brings together the following film practices: the creation of a narrative through collaboration with actors; merging development with production stages; single crew filmmaking; and the use of small, high-quality digital technology. The film develops a methodology for creating a micro-budgeted feature film with strong, truthful and believable performances.

Cottage and the actors, Alex Elliot and Lauren Hurwood, shot the film with help from the local community, including a group of wild boar hunters. During the process the actors remained in character and, through collaboration with the director, realised a film within a fourteen day shooting period.



Right:
Actors reading transcripts
from improvisations.
Photo credit: Ian Cottage

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Aims:

- To devise a more collaborative process than standard forms of feature film production which includes actors in character in the story development.
- To merge the development process with the actual production so that the entire film process is a form of development.
- To utilise digital technology to create a more immediate response to filmmaking practice whereby an actor's performance or interaction with real-life can be captured immediately.

Objectives:

- To realise a working methodology whereby development and the production stages are merged.
- To enable the director to move away from formal production structures and make a film out of a shared, relatively open-ended process.
- To work closely with minimal crew and actors in creating character-focused stories and eliciting deeper, more complex performances than a conventional scripted approach.



Right:
Improvisation was a core element within the process and enabled deep exploration of character.

Photo credit: Ian Cottage

CONTEXT

Conventionally, feature films have been created along the standard industrial form (script development, funding, production and post-production). Every year micro-budgeted films are created outside the traditional funding system. Whilst there is no real set formula as to how these are produced, most work with the same template as their more expensive counterparts.

Directors such as Mike Leigh, John Cassavetes, Joanna Hogg, Jean-François Stévenin and Jacques Rivette have created films in different ways, placing the performer at the centre of the production process. Rivette saw 'actors as collaborators, whose ideas have equal weight with his own' (Wright Wexman 1980). But Mouëllic writes 'contrary to popular belief, this conception of the collective is extremely rare, as the undeniable hierarchy on set makes *shared work* far more common than *collective work*' (Mouëllic 2013). The process of creating *Bosc* required complete commitment by the actors and director to form a narrative as a collective, creative process. This process relates to that in works by Mike Leigh and Joanna Hogg but differs, in that it did not have the usual funding, resources or crew to realise the production. Actors and director Cottage shared responsibility for technical and practical tasks such as scheduling and data wrangling, alongside creation of new scenes and dialogue in response to the location.

Right:
Actor reading a scene, devised
from a previous improvisation.

Photo credit: Ian Cottage



The choice to strip back the production process echoes that of the Dogme 95 film movement whose 'Vow of Chastity' (Yalgin 2003) was instrumental in creating low budgeted films such as Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen*. Cottage's work, however aims to strip back the production process even further and make a feature film with one crew member - the director.

The research especially significant for to filmmaker practitioners working with micro budgets and public film funders interested in devising new practices in drama development and production.



Right:
Filming in Barcelona.
Photo credit: Ian Cottage



Jorge Cuevas, a wild boar hunter, and Alex Elliot filming in the foothills of the Pyrenees.

METHODS & PROCESSES

Over a three month period in 2015, Cottage worked with actors Elliot and Hurwood using devised theatre techniques. A starting point was identifying a location (Montcal in Spain), where local stories could be discussed in workshops and used to stimulate ideas. Through improvisation and games, the characters were developed, enabling Cottage to talk to the characters. Scenes were written based on improvisations and reworked through the workshops. Film and audio was used to capture each session so that it could be used in helping write scenes and sequences. A seventy page script was written as a basis for the production and only read by the actors on the flight over to Spain.

Filming required affordable, small and high-quality video equipment. This was to ensure that Cottage could work fast and the hardware could be used discreetly when filming in public spaces. At times, the filmmaking took on forms of fly on the wall documentary as a number of scenes (particularly the wild boar hunt) were shot in real time single takes. The actors were encouraged to stay in character and react to local people and events. This process of filming responds to the work of Agnès Varda's *Cleo 5 to 7* and Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* which put actors in real-life situations. The team filmed on a wild boar hunt, in bars and street scenes in Girona, Barcelona and in festivals. This on-location filming added authenticity and, on a visual level by filming in crowded festivals, bars and a fairground, greater production value.



Right:
Exploring character through improvisation
in a studio and during filming.

TIMELINE

<p>2015 MAY - AUG</p>	<p>2015 OCT</p>	<p>2015 NOV . 2019 FEB</p>	<p>2019 NOV</p>
<p>Workshops: 15th May to 11th August In total, seven workshops were held at intermittent times running at 3 hours per session, exploring stories from a location, work on characterisation and building story through improvisation and written scenes.</p>	<p>Filming: 15th to 29th October 2015 Twelve days of filming were done in a single location (a 17th century priest's house in the foothills of the Pyrenees) with one day filming in Girona and one in Barcelona.</p>	<p>Editing: November 2015 to February 2019. The editing of <i>Bosc</i> was done at the director's home whilst the grading and sound mix were completed in post-production facilities.</p>	<p>Premiere: Aesthetica – 21st November 2019. The premiere of <i>Bosc</i> was presented and screened to a paying public.</p>



Right:
The editing of *Bosc*.

DISSEMINATION

Bosc was chosen as one of five feature projects for Northern Film and Media's CreateInnovate scheme and subsequently received funding for bespoke mentorship towards on-line distribution.

The film premiered at Aesthetica Short Film Festival, a BAFTA qualifying film festival in November 2019.

Bosc is represented by the British Council at international film festivals.

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Password: BK1



Right:
Alex Elliot, Ian Cottage and Lauren
Hurwood shooting in Girona, Spain.

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Right:
Bosc film cover.

Back cover:
A shot from the last day of filming in Barcelona.
Lauren Hurwood in character.
The image begins and ends the film.



A film by Ian Cottage
Lauren Hurwood Alex Elliott

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