

## Marcus Coates: The Directors

The Directors, commissioned and produced by Artangel, consists of five short films installed at different locations in or near to the Churchill Gardens Estate in Pimlico. In each film, Marcus Coates acts out and interrogates the experiences of five individuals who are in recovery from various psychotic illnesses. Said individuals, located via a call for participants put out by the mental health charity MIND, direct him offscreen, Coates becoming their medium, a role he has often played in the past as a shamanic voyager returning from visionary animal worlds to deliver other kinds of experiential knowledge to audiences and groups, for instance in his film *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004. This time, though, he makes the viewer travel with him.

Each film is different, and some even include reflexive moments, but all follow the format of Coates having onscreen conversations with the offscreen director about the specifics of their psychotic experiences. Heavily edited, this onscreen/offscreen exchange makes for an intense and mesmeric piece of filmic theatre. Coates is not acting per se, or not always, but the films could almost be plays. This is not a criticism. The performative element adds to the purported aim of the project, which is to convey an understanding of psychosis. While the results are not as democratic as Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed, in which participants address their problems by acting them out onstage without a director, film's advantage over theatre is its cultural literacy and mobility - it can be distributed across many platforms, potentially reaching wider audiences. That said, it is unclear whether the installations are set to engage local communities. On my second visit to the Churchill Gardens Residents' Association, the venue from which *The Directors* trail begins, all the seats in the foyer were full, but the screening room was empty - residents were waiting for another purpose.



Marcus Coates, *The Directors: Mark*, 2020, video

For me, the films that best conveyed a sense of what it might be like to experience psychosis were those whose interior spaces echoed or, as with the film directed by Lucy Dempster, replicated the installation spaces. Her film was shot in a replica of the same bedroom in a flat on the estate in which viewers watch the work. Anthony Donohoe's film cuts between a domestic front room and a job centre, whose institutional space resonated with its medical centre location, Pimlico Health on Lupus Street, while Marcus Gordon's film is shot in a cinema/theatre space that had some affinity with the rows of chairs and the theatre curtain at the Residents' Centre. The viewer's proximity to these spaces generated an intense, sometimes unbearable incorporation into the scenarios being enacted, whereas when Coates moved outside to streets and parks, my attention wandered trying to identify the locations and being distracted by random passers-by. In these latter

films too, Coates's performances seemed more like roleplay than becoming, though different viewers will have different opinions about this.

Rather than mere roleplay, the films in which Coates transforms into an object of pathos allowed more room for the viewer to intimate the feelings that permeate the disease: shame, fear and severe alienation. An example is Gordon's film, the first on the trail, in audience. The scene is almost like a Samuel Beckett play, Coates receiving the answers to his questions from Gordon's offscreen voice that resounds loudly from speakers behind the viewer. Black-clothed assistants enter and exit with props to facilitate Coates's replication of 'the sensations experienced by Gordon during a psychotic episode on a bus. He directs Coates's response to the electric heaters, ice cubes and plates of raw meat the assistants confront him with, though Coates also involuntarily reacts as he sweats, shivers and finally pisses himself, whether real or simulated, in an action that viscerally conveyed the abject shame Gordon describes in their fast-paced dialogue. The onscreen audience, standing in for the other people on the bus, rise up to the stage and whisper into Coates's ear Gordon's paranoid projections of their harsh judgements on his appearance and behaviour. The episode shifts gear. The stage disappears, Coates's seated spotlighted figure becoming diminutive in the darkness, an analogy for the numbness and severe disconnection from surroundings following the barrage of voices. Coates is directed to repeat the last phrase Gordon heard before the breakdown: 'What's going on?'

This is a question that viewers are also continually asking themselves in relation to the films, disorientation becoming real through Coates's performances. In Dempster's film, her visual hallucinations in conjunction with a punitive male inner voice make for a mesmerising but terrifying journey, added to which in this film Coates's interrogatory dialogue with Lucy and her super-egoic voice initially appears to aggravate the nightmarish scenarios - his frustration, resistance and eventual acquiescence being beautifully played. After convincingly conveying a sense of the insubstantiality of everything in Lucy's perceptual world, Coates goes on to rattle the bedroom walls, which are revealed to be a stage set rather than the flat's solid walls. In a further discombobulation, the camera zooms out on a maquette of the room, Lucy's hands descending from above to rearrange the furniture. Coates asks her what would she say to her 14-year-old self (Dempster is now in her late teens), her voice-over replies: 'It does get better: This is the only film that redeems the experience, and apparently the scene was Coates's suggestion. Formally, I was not convinced of its necessity, but perhaps the relief it offers is vital psychologically, as this film's heady effects continue to reverberate as one walks to the next venue.

Another question that kept returning to me while watching the films concerned how Coates's performances of self-dissolution might be affecting him. In Donohoe's film, Coates returns home from the job centre, but cannot recognise 'his mother' asleep on the couch. Dialoguing with Donohoe's offscreen voice, Coates tests out ways of playing the scene to convey this disconnection. It is not working until suddenly Coates, almost like a method actor, seems to resurrect something deep within and begins wailing uncontrollably. The truth of his performance, rather than the action, is affirmed by Donohoe, but it struck me that Coates was channeling something personal here. The scene was extremely disorienting so I may be completely off the mark, but, in the post-scene dialogue in the film, Coates implies that two realities might have collided in his mind: one relating to not recognising 'mum' as Anthony, the other relating to a loss of 'mum' outside of that guise.

Ultimately, what Coates's approximations palpably convey is the incapacitating exhaustion of living with psychotic illnesses. This cannot but generate compassion, but the films are also genuinely upsetting because they question the fine line between control and loss of control in relation to what is commonly agreed upon as shared reality. In further conversations with the directors on the Artangel website, Dempster asserts that, while the films may be triggering, the idea is not to fear the experience but to try to understand it, and while the collaborative dynamic is sometimes question-able, Coates's distance from the directors' experiences, while fictively subjecting himself to them, succeeds in bringing the viewer into an intimate relation with extreme mental anguish.

The Directors was screened at Churchill Gardens Estate, London from 4 September to 30 October.

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