

***The Process* (2023): Non-Professional Film Performance and Representing Embodied Trauma through Documentary**

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This article examines the process of collaborating with non-professional actors in the creation of an auto-fictional documentary short film representing forms of embodied vulnerability. It explores how non-professional actors and filmmakers can creatively and ethically utilise actors' lived experiences by creating characters whose performances mirror those experiences. Drawing on the findings from a collaborative research project on non-professional film performance and embodied trauma, the article examines the ethics and politics of representing trauma through a documentary film with non-professional actors, with a heightened emphasis on their own agency and well-being. This is done through meta-critical reflection based on participant observations carried out during the documentary's rehearsal and development process, as well as close readings of the final edit of the documentary short film.



Introduction

Despite their significant presence in a wide range of world cinemas, non-professional actors (NPAs), understood as first-time and/or untrained actors, have received very little critical attention. Generally, they have been considered as embodied markers of realism and authenticity, and their contribution a question of being (like their characters) rather than acting (Gaggiotti 2023). There has also been little consideration given to the complex ethical challenges surrounding the casting and process of working with NPAs (O'Rawe et al. 2023) and the attendant need for safeguarding practices to be at the centre of the filmmaking process to ensure ethical collaboration takes place when working with NPAs. This study examines the process of collaborating with NPAs in the creation of audiovisual artworks (films, television shows, documentaries) that represent forms of embodied vulnerability. Specifically, it explores how NPAs and filmmakers can creatively and ethically utilise actors' lived experiences in the process of creating characters whose experiences of trauma mirror those experienced by the actors in their own lives, present or past.

To examine these issues, in this article we will draw on the findings from the collaborative project 'The Wounds We Keep: Youth, Trauma and Otherness in the 21st Century', funded by the Brigstow Institute and involving a group of researchers from the University of Bristol, a group of filmmakers, and four male NPAs with lived experiences of the British penitentiary system in the process of devising, rehearsing, and developing a short film building on the actors' experience. This process has been documented through the production of an auto-fictional short documentary film, entitled *The Process* (2023). The documentary, with a running duration of seventeen minutes, offers critical insight into this creative and collaborative process, enabling the project's researchers and participants, as well as audiences (filmmakers, researchers, and other (non-professional) actors), to gain a better understanding of new forms of creative collaboration, their challenges, and limitations. Embedded in the film are fictional scenes illustrating the collaborative work of the NPAs, filmmakers, and researchers, which explore forms of discrimination and unconscious bias in the British penitentiary system. Besides interrogating collaborative filmmaking methods and processes, an important aim of the project was to examine audiovisual embodied representations of people affected by intersectional forms of otherness (e.g., racism and racial discrimination, unconscious biases around gender, class, ethnic and socioeconomic background) in the 21st century, and to what extent these have caused generational trauma linked to social inequalities and embodied vulnerability. In cinema, these forms of representation have historically been produced through

work with NPAs (Gaggiotti 2022). The visibility, inclusion, and ethical collaboration at the core of this project are means to raise awareness and counteract such forms of intersectional otherness and promote social and institutional change.

NPAs have performed in films since the birth of cinema in the late 19th century. They have been at the heart of influential film movements such as early Soviet cinema (1920–1931), Italian neorealism (1945–1952), Brazilian Cinema Novo (1962–1971), and the Second Wave of Iranian Cinema (1985–1995). They have also performed regularly in films by celebrated directors such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Agnès Varda, Ken Loach, and Abbas Kiarostami, among many others. Since the turn of the century and the rise of digital filmmaking from 2005–2010, NPAs have featured prominently in award-winning films such as *Vitalina Varela* (2019), *Roma* (2018), *A Ciambra* (2017), *Nomadland* (2017), and *Alcarràs* (2022). Their flexibility and capacity for adjustment might stem from the ‘malleability of the non-professional who, lacking training or experience, has been described as clay the filmmaker can manipulate, a collaborator in the filmmaking process lacking voice or input’ (Gaggiotti 2021: 249). Though NPA’s lack of training and experience might make it easier for filmmakers to manipulate them, it can also ‘make it easier for the non-professional actor to surprise the filmmaker, offering new, unexpected and truly original solutions not anticipated by the filmmakers themselves’ (Gaggiotti 2021: 249). Collaboration with NPAs thus raises ethical and aesthetic issues by problematising the approach to performance and to the filmmaking material as fictional or non-fictional.

The sharp distinction between fiction and non-fiction is in itself problematic and has been questioned. Friend posits that ‘[w]hereas works of non-fiction invite us to *believe* what they portray, works of fiction invite us to *make believe* or *imagine* it’ (2021: 152; original emphasis), but that the categorical distinction between fiction and non-fiction is more nuanced than it might seem and that ‘there are no essential features that distinguish between fiction and non-fiction’ (2021: 151). In many historical and contemporary cases, rather than playing pre-conceived or pre-written roles, NPAs contribute through their experiences and narratives to the creation of original characters, events, and situations. This approach to characterisation, particularly common in films with NPAs and colloquially referred to as “having NPAs play themselves”, is often further emphasised through naming the on-screen characters after the NPAs playing them. Such operations contribute to confusing fiction and reality and creating the impression that the events in the film might closely correspond to the NPA’s lived experiences. The anonymity of the NPAs – the fact that audiences are unfamiliar with their faces and bodies having never encountered them before – further contributes to this authenticity effect. For this reason, filmmakers such as Robert Bresson chose to

work with NPAs only once, as they typically feared that having NPAs play different roles would damage the authenticity of their initial performances.

If NPAs can bring realism and authenticity to a role because they have had similar lived experiences to those of their fictional characters, what is at stake when asking these actors to work with such experiences, especially when they might be traumatic? How can such processes be carried out in an ethical, collaborative, and safeguarded way, taking into account the NPAs' embodied vulnerability? These questions are crucial because, unlike professional actors, NPAs might not have a technique or method to work with personal experiences in the process of creating embodied representations. They might also not have a robust understanding of how films work and how their performances will be utilised. Herein lies the ethical importance of a safeguarded filmmaking process when collaborating with NPAs, especially when the filmmaking involves dealing with auto-fictional material that taps into the lived experiences of participants and their embodied vulnerability. The mix of fictional and non-fictional elements in the film points to auto-fiction, which Forné and López-Gay identify 'as a contemporary cinematic mode that challenges, and at times subverts, the generic limits of documentary and fiction film from a self-reflexive position' (2022: 228). As a result of its trans-generic status, auto-fictional film creates a 'space in-between which includes, but cannot be reduced to, documentary and/or fiction cinema' (228).

In their study of embodied vulnerability in film through what they call auto-documentaries recorded with smartphones by refugees and asylum seekers, Pérez Zapata and Navarro-Remesal argue that vulnerable filmmaking processes 'allow vulnerable subjects to actively present their vulnerability and humanity in their own terms, contributing to articulate their experience as a form of resistance in which the subjective dealing with vulnerability becomes embodied and situated for audiences rather than merely represented' (2024: 13). Auto-fictional documentaries, they argue, have the potential to 'reveal the protagonists' vulnerabilities in a highly contextualized manner', rejecting the often-biased representation of minoritised vulnerable groups and resisting the dehumanisation to which they are often reduced (Pérez Zapata and Navarro-Remesal 2024: 184). In research carried out using methodologies like participatory video or applied theatre, usually set in safeguarded contexts like the penitentiary system, it is suggested that 'the collaborative construction of knowledge with participants/collaborators is a more ethical approach' (Cardinal 2019: 35) and that a collaborative approach contributes to the development of [participants'] control over their own work (Garthwaite 2000), rather than an extractivist practice. Thus, auto-documentaries like *The Process* can offer 'an ethical form of representation that moves away from mediated and/or humanitarianist perspectives' (Pérez Zapata and

Navarro-Remesal 2024: 184), giving participants agency in constructing a filmic discourse about their embodied vulnerability. In this article, we examine the ethics and politics of representing traumatic lived experience through an auto-fictional documentary short film with NPAs. The article will feature meta-critical reflection based on participant observations carried out during the documentary's rehearsal and development process, as well as close readings of the final edit of the documentary short film, *The Process*.

Performance Spaces in *The Process*

The Process is structured as a series of short, stand-alone fictional scenes depicting specific scenarios related to the British Criminal Justice System (CJS). Each scene is preceded by intertitles superimposed on a blank screen, numbering each scene and situating the action in space and time through screenwriting shorthand (1. Ext. Street – Night; 2. Int. Jail Cell – Night). The editing juxtaposes these scenes, shot during the second filming day, with footage from the rehearsal and devising process on the first filming day, and from a video-call conversation between the NPAs, the director and one of the researchers, which was conducted after filming had finished. The interweaving of fiction (performed prison scenes), meta-fiction (discussion about the filming process), and auto-fiction (performance of NPAs' lived experiences) allows for a nuanced discussion of both safeguarding practices when working with NPAs in film and of prejudice and unconscious biases in the CJS, drawing from the lived experiences of participants with a heightened emphasis on their own agency and well-being. It is important to stress that institutional ethical approval (University of Bristol School of Education Ethics Committee, application number 14601) was successfully sought prior to select individuals being approached to contribute to the project. The anonymity of participants has been maintained in response to the guidance of the British Educational Research Association (2024).

The first of the performed scenes is a short interaction between two NPAs playing old friends. One of them has just been released from prison and is on probation. On his way to see his parole officer, he runs into his friend, who encourages him to use drugs (smoke a joint of marijuana) out in the street. He is hesitant at first, but eventually agrees and, as they start rolling the joint, a police officer (played by the director of the film and workshop facilitator) approaches them. When they see the police officer, the friend who insisted on smoking in the street, who is white British, pretends he has nothing to do with the illegal activity and blames it on his friend, who is black British and whom the police officer violently arrests.

In the next scene, a black man is in his prison cell, writing a letter to apologise for the injuries caused to someone during an altercation, which is presumably the reason he was incarcerated. After a few attempts at verbalising his apology and guilt, he gets frustrated and gives up. This segues into a conversation between the NPAs and the workshop facilitator about prejudice in the British CJS. The NPA in the scene says that, rather than seek justice and identify the causes of a crime, the CJS tends to focus on finding culprits and incarcerating them. They mention the introduction of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act (also related to the Health and Social Care Act) in 2006–2008, and how, as a result of this legislation, personal circumstances (e.g., mental health issues, socioeconomic background) are now taken into consideration in the CJS (UK Gov 2006, 2008). The NPAs talk about the stigma surrounding incarceration, as well as racial prejudices in the CJS and the difficulties faced by imprisoned people, their families, and communities (e.g., isolation due to geographical distance, added financial strain on families and on prison inmates' mental health).

In the third scene, a prison inmate asks a prison officer for information on his early release, only to be dismissed and insulted: "I've told you already, you're here with us, do you understand me? Get out of my sight, you mug!" In the fourth scene, a prison inmate has a conversation with a visitor, a friend or family member, who admonishes him for being back in prison instead of realising his potential. The prison inmate shows contrition and guilt. In scene five, an inmate asks a prison officer in the corridor outside his prison cell to deliver his mail as he is expecting a letter with photos of his daughters. The prison officer is dismissive and cruel, ignoring the inmate's request. The inmate, desperate and frustrated, performs simulated self-harm on his wrists and arms with a sharp object. The prison officer sees this and enters the cell, immobilising the inmate violently by throwing him face down on the floor and handcuffing him. After a fade to black, a shot of the empty and bloodstained prison cell floor is shown, followed by the sound of a prison cell door closing. Immediately after, the NPAs and filmmakers discuss the importance of sensory elements like the sound of the closing door to create an authentic audio-visual depiction that will resonate with viewers. Scene six starts with two inmates in a cell discussing their remaining sentences. One of them is very discouraged and is losing hope. A prison officer enters the cell and lets him know that he is going to be released: "They give you the tag¹, you'll be out in a few days." He jumps for joy and happily hugs the other inmate. In the final scene, the same inmate who has been granted early release in the previous scene is standing on a stage

¹ To 'get the tag' means to be released under a Home Detention Curfew, a form of electronic monitoring where a prisoner serves the final part of their sentence at home with an electronic device attached to their ankle. This tag monitors their location and ensures they adhere to a strict curfew, facilitating a managed transition to community life and potentially easing prison overcrowding (see UK Government 2025 <https://www.gov.uk/browse/justice/prisons-probation>).

giving an inspirational speech to his peers at his graduation ceremony from an acting school, where he has been able to obtain a degree after his prison sentence. The scene is cross-cut with his release from prison as he is greeted joyfully by a friend or family member outside.

Observation data from the rehearsal workshop and filming day of the production process revealed spaces to be fluid in *The Process* as they were utilised by NPAs in different ways at different phases of the production. This fluidity was evidenced in the changing of spatial use across the two filming days, as well as the simultaneous multiple considerations of some spaces. For example, whilst some spaces were explicitly zoned as areas for rehearsal, review, or break time, these spaces also became associated with different times, experiences, and potentials. NPAs would step into their roles as actors in front of the camera, and into other roles, such as camera operators and directors, as they repositioned themselves in the rooms used. This repositioning constituted a self- or group-regulation of the actors' engagement with themes and tasks that could be considered "sensitive" or "triggering" and, as such, could be considered an ethical spatial strategy for safeguarding NPAs.

Towards the beginning of the production process, the rehearsal space was clearly zoned to foster role differentiation between actors, film crew, and researchers. By placing the researchers at the edge of the room, arranging vacant chairs in the centre, and orienting the crew and their cameras towards the middle of the room, the actors became more distinctly a group of their own, with an area for performance already demarcated by spectators. At break times, actors and facilitators would leave the performance area and move to the edges of the room, or would need to pass behind some curtains, out of sight, to get microphones attached and adjusted. In this way, the spatial arrangement of the rooms in which the research occurred reproduced senses of entrance and exit that are already animated by performance and that centre a concern for the actors' capacity to act. This was reflected in the edited film in various ways.

The Process begins with cross-cut shots of the empty chairs in the central rehearsal space, a spacious room with minimal décor, interspersed with shots of the blank screen and a voiceover of the conversations between the participants and the filmmakers and researchers initiating the rehearsal process. Shots of the backs of the workshop facilitator and participants in an exterior location walking towards the filming space are also included. "Hope" is the initial word uttered by one of the participants, signalling that this will be one of the most important ideas driving the multiple processes being depicted: that of the filming of *The Process*, the participants' own process of rehearsing, devising, and filming the scenes in the documentary film, as well as their embodied process of performance as they draw from their lived experiences of the British penitentiary system.

Indeed, the NPAs did not just act in this collaborative project, but also slipped into other roles, such as directing, camera operating, and set dressing. On the project's filming day, the actors' behaviour changed markedly depending on which zone they were occupying at different moments, whether in front of the camera, behind it, or watching the video feed on another screen. Each of these zones afforded NPAs the opportunity to collaborate in the production process, for example by tweaking the wording, framing, or direction of scenes (this will be explored further in subsequent sections).

This zoning became significant for regulating participant safety and collective mood in scenes that depicted traumatic (past) events. For example, in scene five, one of the actors simulates self-harm, repeatedly performing cutting and emoting intensely. This prompted some observing researchers to remark that "they [NPAs] are very in the scene", or elsewhere that the actors "came out of themselves" (observation notes). Yet following the director's "Cut!", the actor demonstratively performed a jovial mood, jumping to his feet to receive direction. Here, the zoning of space is achieved through a different arrangement that relies on the calls "Action" and "Cut". "Action" places the actors in front of the camera in the scene and out of themselves, whereas "Cut" brings this space back to the mediated shoot location. In this way, actors are brought close to and away from experiences of violence or vulnerability, which they themselves have experienced directly or indirectly and re-enact for the camera. Actors and crew were thus aware of an underlying and shared embodied vulnerability in the production space, and each worked to perform given roles in different spaces to maintain an atmosphere conducive to film creation.

Internalised Insight: Affect, Embodied Vulnerability and Emotional Landscapes

The actors navigated research, filming and imagined spaces throughout the project, and brought specific knowledge and personal experiences from contexts outside of these, predominantly the CJS. In the observations, this was described as an "internalised insight" that seemed to give NPAs a more authoritative or authentic understanding of the CJS, as well as illicit activity in general. This insight leant itself to the production of fiction in terms of acting performance, improvisation, and ad lib, as well as direction and review. It also led to critiques of the CJS more broadly. As one of the director's voiceovers in the film suggests, one of the key intentions of the filmmakers and researchers was to create a film in which, "rather than [...] an extractive process, the members of the community have ownership over the film that is put out into the world". Giving agency to the NPAs to draw from their lived experience when devising and performing in *The Process* is thus one of the cruxes of the film.

When devising, actors drew on their past experiences concerning arrest, trial, and incarceration to create scenes containing visual and verbal cues, which were potentially meaningful to those with the internalised insight to recognise them. One devising activity had the group working in pairs, with the non-performing pair interpreting or de-coding the performing pair's narrative. Acknowledging the group's shared pasts, the guessing pair were given clues to guide them to the right answer:

“What happens when...?”

“Where does that happen...?”

“And then you go where...?”

This was very playfully pedagogical.

(Researcher observation notes, rehearsal day)

Such interactions progressively made it clear that the NPAs were bringing nuanced and situated knowledge and embodiment to the production process (Bae 2023; Chamarette 2015). As filming progressed, the actors stepped into other roles concerning direction, review, and consulting. They commented on the authenticity and realism of the devised scenes, such as the letter-writing scene in the film, regarding the scenography of the 'cell', or in terms of performance. The NPAs began to hold each other accountable to a commonly imagined, 'authentic' commentary on life 'inside'. This authenticity was not neutral; however, from the perspective of the actors, it had to maintain a critical edge *vis à vis* the CJS:

[One actor] is providing feedback [to another] – he says:

“This scene isn't about you having to change your ways, 'cause you haven't done anything wrong. It's about you [indistinguishable]”.

[Facilitator] clarifies:

“It's about you giving up hope”.

(Researcher observation notes, filming day)

In terms of narrative creation, one actor encourages another to avoid reproducing a typical characterisation of the prisoner as necessarily 'in the wrong' and remorseful. Instead, he pushes for a representation of the character as strategically moving through prison systems to receive a tag, but not without the emotional toll of this strategy going unrecorded.

Beyond the narrative, through *ad lib* and the use of slang, actors were able to bring to the fictional scenes modes of speech and registers specific to their own lived

experiences, which would unlikely have been written into a script otherwise. These forms of embodied, situated knowledge affected other actors in the rehearsal spaces, in ways that sometimes surprised them. For example, after one actor improvised his role as a prison guard, other actors replied:

“That [dialogue] was great, [imitates:] ‘Dunno why!’”

(Researcher observation notes, filming day)

“Give us that look [...], you know there are just some looks they give.”

(Researcher observation notes, filming day)

“It’s different senses in jail ... it’s noisy in jail ... [the jingling keys] made it so much more real to me.”

(Researcher observation notes, rehearsal day)

Whether a phrase (“Dunno why”), a performed look, or an accompanying sound, certain fragments were both detected by the actors, given their internalised insight of such scenes, and were subsequently incorporated into the film. The actors’ pasts entered the rehearsal space through affects, sounds, and details that can be ‘felt’, and by feeling these pasts during the production process, the actors’ expertise-by-experience shaped in turn the affective register of the film output. The effect is a loose temporality, which was reported to be felt as more impactful than the constructed fictional narratives alone:

“It put me right back in the moment ... I really got into it; **I felt it.**”

(Researcher observation notes, rehearsal day, emphasis added)

As Stadler puts it, ‘[cinema] appeals directly to the senses, locating the spectator within the visual and aural space of the story world and within the subjective experiences of its inhabitants. As such, film works on the emotions, stimulates the imagination, and has the capacity to elicit an affective response’ (2012: 3). The insight that the NPAs brought to the production process challenges how knowledge is often conceived in scholarly and production contexts. The NPAs’ knowledge of the CJS was not learnt from another source but rather experienced; as such, this knowledge was something embodied and affective, modalities which showed themselves to be particularly suited to multiple aspects of the filmmaking, from performance to directing. They constituted what Hemer and Dundon call ‘the negotiation and expression of emotional landscapes’ and the ways in which these ‘engage, or are engaged by, the senses’ (2016: 2). That this emotional and sensory landscape was shared across the NPAs rather than ‘owned’ by one member of the team meant that each performer’s actions could be recognised and

felt by others in ways that could not be predicted, and that importantly changed the temporalities of the rehearsal and filming process by repeatedly evoking past times and spaces.

Playing with Past and Present

Extending our analysis to the unexpected and/or temporal aspects of the production process, critical observations also picked up on the ways in which NPAs were not just “put right back” in moments past through their performance, but how this transportation was playful and enjoyable, in turn blurring the limits between past and present.

During the rehearsal day, play became a significant part of the scheduled activities, involving warm-up games and devising activities. Play fostered a sense of group belonging for the NPAs, for example by using name games, and set some affective terms as one of the elements of the team’s “group agreement” centred on “having fun”. Observations of play noted that it afforded increased comfort for NPAs in front of the cameras, while creating a cohesive and safeguarded environment in preparation for the more serious and intense atmospheres created during group discussions.

In ways that departed from the description of internalised insight above, the play involved in devising activities allowed NPAs to use their lived experience to inspire what was eventually performed, without having to necessarily re-live or accurately reproduce such experiences. This meant that what was to be performed could be perceived as malleable and open to review. Rather than narrating *their* own pasts, NPAs were creating narratives of *the* past in a general sense through the creation of fiction. The provisionality and unofficial nature of play in devising “supposes that nothing is the final product and that things might get messy before things take shape ... is this a safe container which operates by slightly different consent logics?” (Researcher observation notes, rehearsal day).

Whilst play worked to foster an amicable, trusting group dynamic which could bear working with the past(s), observation also showed that play – in particular, laughter – worked in the present to facilitate dealing with potential sensitive areas in the group, as well as to negotiate limits in the production process. Indeed, laughter appeared to work as a lubricant to the production process, smoothing over sticking points, minimising the potential for harm (emotional and physical), avoiding any harms from the past becoming re-amplified in the room whilst, paradoxically, preventing time being dedicated to wider, critical discussions of race, gender and violence in the CJS during the process of filming. A prime example of this can be seen in this account of filming a scene depicting the arrest of a black character by a white police officer (Scene 1):

Someone needs to play a cop.

[Facilitator] decides to play the police officer and gets into costume. It is funny because he has shared [critical] opinions on policing throughout this process.

[Producer] says it is funny because he does, in fact, look like a cop, owing to his height.

[Actor] says it is his haircut, [another actor] agrees, saying he looks like he's fresh out of the academy "with something to prove".

[A third actor] says, "It suits you bro, your new career!" ...

[Facilitator] says, "I'm doing one role in the whole thing, one character, and it had to be this one!"

All laugh. I ask, "How are you going to get into character?"

He replies, "As little as possible".

(Researcher observation notes, filming day)

Participants involved in filming the scene used play to navigate the complex terrain between their personal past experiences – and the attendant sensitive issues triggered by their memory – and their present position in relation to the filming process. In this way, they navigated dynamics of racialised policing as they appeared across the group, but the jovial atmosphere, fast pace of the shoot day, and the presence of laughter prevented the conversation from stalling production or dampening spirits. When shooting this scene, race and racial difference became especially significant. Some NPAs initially wanted to shoot the scene outside the filming studio, in a public street, "against a real tower block" (Researcher observation notes), but it was noted that this presented a real danger of attracting actual police presence or unwanted public attention in the staging of an arrest that seemed to suit the actors all too well. As this scene was recorded inside the filming studio, members of the public did indeed walk and drive past the scene, and later:

[Facilitator] mentions he decided not to use the prop handcuffs ... Participants laugh at this statement and [an actor] remarks: "Props change things".

(Researcher observation notes, filming day)

Costumes, staging and props thus became triggering agents which blurred the already thinly-demarcated boundaries between fiction and auto-fiction. Playing with the past in the present created its own racial and gendered dynamics within the group that clustered around re-enactments of violence and discrimination. The ability of play to generate laughter could be said to help demarcate between the spaces NPAs

navigated during the filming process (onscreen severity versus offscreen levity) and to offset the affective potential of the creative process to transport NPAs back to scenes of violence and inequity in an imagined sense. In such a process, past and present are blurred together, and laughter and play were used communally to negotiate this. This emotional malleability became an important safeguarding practice.

In *The Process*, the playful warm-up activities are interspersed with the devised and performed scenes, showing how the multi-temporal filmmaking process is made up of memories, constructed behaviours, and interactions among the performers and the filmmaking team. Through editing, we see how the games and devising activities mirror the scenes performed by NPAs, mixing their lived experiences with the imagined scenarios in *The Process*. The editing also jumbles up the temporality of the different processes taking place during the filming, such that the performed scenes throughout the film point to different temporal stages beforehand and afterwards.

After scene three, for example, in which an inmate and a prison officer have a conversation, we are taken through cross-cutting to a devising activity, in which the same two actors are talking about how the scene is going to be developed. We then see other NPAs both standing behind a camera and acting in front of it, narrating or enacting the scenes we have previously seen in the film. One of the NPAs then recalls his own experience of being arrested violently and expresses how both devising and seeing the scene performed had the powerful effect of moving him through different temporal frames, helping him recall past events vividly but also use those events to enhance the present performance. Self-knowledge and empathy are key consequences of this process, as one of the NPAs puts it: “That is [...] emotionally challenging to actually relive that moment knowing that you’ve been in that situation in real life”; “I could really feel everybody else’s pain, it was really magical, man”. Concluding the film with an NPA graduating from acting school and speaking honestly about his past experiences of bias, arrest and incarceration, and how this performed scenario points to the actual lived experience of the NPAs and some filmmakers involved in the film brings these two dimensions together. The film also creates a dual discourse around the ethics of drawing from NPAs’ lived experiences in the filmmaking process and its significance when representing vulnerable subjects and sensitive issues in a safeguarded way through auto-fictional filmmaking.

Conclusion

This study has focused on the ways in which NPAs navigate spaces in, bring insight to, and through agency play with past and present in the filmmaking process.

However, each of these aspects of non-professional acting are also mediated by the apparatuses of filmmaking, including sound engineering, editing, *mise en scène* and camera work. Fictional or non-fictional documentaries and, more specifically, auto-fictional documentaries ‘redress questions of self-representation by bringing to the fore testimonies of the traumatic circumstances’ experienced by vulnerable individuals from minoritised groups (Pérez Zapata and Navarro Remesal 2024: 190). By acknowledging that incarcerated populations, like other marginalised groups, live or have lived under conditions of extreme surveillance (Renold et al. 2008; Reiter 2021) and have been exposed to unconscious bias and discrimination, we have asked: what does it mean for formerly incarcerated actors to engage with recording equipment and produce an audio-visual output?

For Nichols, the ‘documentary voice’ is ‘clearly akin to film style: both rely on the same cinematic techniques (editing, speech, music, composition, lighting, etc.)’ (2010: 69). However, unlike style in fiction, voice ‘derives from the director’s attempt to translate his or her perspective on the actual historical world into audio-visual terms; it also stems from his or her direct involvement with the film’s subject’ (Nichols 2010: 69). By being the subjects and co-creators of the auto-fictional documentary, NPAs could translate their own perspectives into a documentary voice of their own. Throughout the research and production processes, the NPAs were triply observed. They were observed by researchers collecting data, by other NPAs who watched and recognised small details in their performances, and by the cameras and their operators. None of these forms of surveillance need be understood as straightforwardly negative, nor as simply reiterating the same surveillance dynamics the NPAs might have previously experienced. Indeed, with reference to the use of cameras, this appeared to have the effect of heightening the significance of the actors’ conversations and performances. We noted how the technology and procedure of filmmaking, in promising an ‘official’ output (*The Process*) to which all participants were oriented, gave significance to all aspects of the production process. Building on the sections discussed above, the NPAs’ expertise-by-experience became especially significant because of its perceived ability to produce a sense of authenticity in the final output, but this expertise needed to be combined with the filmmaking technologies in particular spaces, at particular times and with particular emphases in order to produce an ‘official’, accurate and critical portrayal of prison life that can last into the future, to the NPAs’ satisfaction. Spaces, temporalities and affects, in other words, all became variously used and navigated by the NPAs in ways that might exceed their position as actors.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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