Marcus Coates & The Directors in conversation
Part 2

Charles: Anthony, quite strikingly, I think, you picture your voices as actual people scattered around the room.

Anthony: Mm-hmm.

Charles: How important is that sense of physical presence for people dealing with distressing voices?

Anthony: I think there's two sides to that. There's the physical presence of people in reality, which is a distraction from it. And then you have this... For me, they're voices are people that I know so it's interacting with people that I already know and interact with normally anyway. And previously when I was in hospital, there was an experience where there was voices of people I know, and I was talking to them for a very long period, because I hadn't slept. And they were just outside the window, but they were still...

There was a spatial awareness of them. And so it wasn't so much about making it seem like the cliche of voices, but more about actually you can see how suffocating it can be and how time consuming it can actually be interacting with all this chaos that goes on in an environment where you would expect something to be stable or that everybody needs stability in the domestic environment. And when you don't have that, then that's when I struggle to interact with the wider world when I leave my front door, so yeah.

Marcus Coates: It's Marcus Coates. For me being around those voices and them having a physical presence, I remember you saying, "They're like my mates, they're just around. So they're always there." And they may or may not have physical friends, but for them to be acted and just to be there, I didn't have to imagine it anymore. For me, it was a vehicle to bring it into my reality and to make it very real for me. So I had to contend with not just them saying things, but just my awareness that they were there all the time, watching and judging or whatever they were doing.

Anthony: I think sometimes is, don't get on with everybody all the time. So even if you're not having that inner battle with yourself, you're having conflict somewhere. And throughout my life, it's been very, very chaotic since I was very young. So to not experience any form of chaos, that I couldn't go to the countryside and stay there for very long because it's just too quiet, nothing carry on, that would make me feel crazy. But being in a really chaotic environment is something that's so normal to me that even when I'm functioning, there's still that element of where there's kind of something in the background. But then obviously when being unwell, it just completely tips balance and everything's just off the pole literally.

Charles: Lucy, at one point in your film, you have Marcus drawing the voices. You said it gets them out of your head and makes them real. Did making the film have something of the same kind of effect for you?

Lucy: It did. Yeah, definitely. I think as I explained sort of Marcus in the film, I think drawing them, having a physical representation of them, although you could almost feel them as real in your head, actually seeing it on paper was almost establishing that they are real. Even

though they may not be real, they're real to me. And that was what was quite important. So having the film be made and watching it has made it so much more real, but in a way that's made it better, which sounds kind of counterproductive. You wouldn't want an experience that feels so real already to become more real.

But when it's more real, it's more certain. And I found that sort of easier to establish that sort of relationship I had with psychosis. Yeah, it definitely got it a bit more out of just being in my head because I could actually see it happening. It was quite a experience to even make the film because it was feeling it all over again. But it was in a very different way because I could see it in reality and I knew it was reality. I did have to remind myself a couple times, but yeah, definitely it was helpful and in the same sort of way, yeah.

Charles: Did anybody help the same kind of experience of making the film making things feel real?

Anthony: I think so. I think there's this thing of having your own truth, whether or not you can trust your own thoughts at the time or your experience. Your experience is as real in the moment. As you say, making a film, then it's got a physical presence. You've then created your version of what happened for you. And as an individual, that then makes something not necessarily so real as in the experience of it, but more about the fact that it's somewhere in your mind. It's not just somebody saying to you , you were unwell. It's there. Do you know what I mean? It's documented. And I think that's very important when it comes to being people, is having your own story, having your own truth.

Charles: I think that's what you said earlier in a way about making a line in the sound and saying, "This happened, this is where I was four years ago," or whenever it was.

Stephen: Yeah. It's sort of like, although I don't believe that now, at the time, it felt very, very real. And to just leave it in the past and never tell the story about it just seems to be a bit of a waste that if you do tell your story, your truth, other people will see that and they'll have that better understanding. So it's better to use that experience. And although you don't believe in it now, tell them what it was like at the time.

And maybe they might recognise that in somebody that they know or they might know someone who's going through something, they give them a better understanding. Somebody might see it and think, "Oh right, I'm going through this now. This is what's happening to me but these people, they are leading a better life". It might give them some more hope. You know what I mean? So that's ultimately what I would like to come away from this. You know what I mean? Believing. You know what I mean?

Marcus Coates: In your film, Stephen, so much of it was about... Seemed to be about evidence.

Stephen: Yeah, yeah.

Marcus Coates: Evidence is a big word for you.

Stephen: Yeah, yeah.

Marcus Coates: Proving or disproving or people were trying to prove things about your waiting for the mistake. And in a way maybe, I don't know, does this film even now represent evidence for you that it existed in a way, so you can separate yourself from it? It's kind of evidence for yourself.

Stephen: It's evidence of where I used to be, yeah. Yeah, yeah. And like I said, I don't want it to just have been for nothing and to been forgotten. I don't just want to bury it. Do you know what I mean? And by doing this film there for people to see people to find you and understand, because like I said earlier, and I never went into so much detail about this ever before. And all the questioning that was going on, it was refreshing that somebody was trying to understand. And if more people try to understand, then that's got to make it better for people who are going through it now or who'd go through it in the future.

Because I did find it in isolating time. I felt lonely. You know what I mean? And these people still sat there now, out in the community and you just wish somebody would reach out to them. You know what I mean? If people see this film, they might identify and think, "That might be what's happening to that guy. Yeah, I've seen this woman," you know what I mean? "And she's just thought of that. I wonder if anybody's checking in on her at all." Do you know what I mean? Sort of thing. It's important. Yeah.

Anthony: I think as well, there's a huge misunderstanding around the diagnosis of psychosis, and also the fact that it's almost like saying that we were all here. We're taking the experience to the next level by creating these films because not only are we saying we were here and documenting everything, it's kind of opening up a channel for communication and not creating more misunderstanding, I guess, in the community and society.

Charles: Lucy, I was struck by how some of the voices that Marcus hears in the film have very clear identities to the extent that you can describe them in great detail, while others are less specific. Does that make any difference, do you think, in terms of the effect on the person experiencing them?

Lucy: Yeah, I think it did. I think for me, there was some that were very prominent, very powerful. And one particularly in the film that you saw, which was always there, but as I said in the film as well, it almost made it more comforting. But yeah, I think it was very different because there were some that were just background characters. If you imagine in a real film, you've got background players and you've got the main characters and sub characters, all sorts of things. It's almost like levels of intensity and sometimes you've just got the background characters, or you've got just the main character, and then sometimes you've got it all at once and I think having those levels of intensity were quite important in the film as well because we turned it up, we turned it down, we turned it off. It wasn't always the same. It was quite fluid in my experience. It was always changing, which was quite an important thing to explore. But yeah, I think definitely the fact that there were different levels of intensity with the voices was important and the fact that there was one main one for me was quite a big thing. I don't know, just having that one that was consistent and then all the rest sort of changing.

Charles: So is it like, give something a name and you can start to understand it, even if you don't really understand it, you've got a handle on it.

Lucy: Yeah, I think so, yeah. And I think this was one that I had things to explain. Mine never had names. There were never people I knew. They were oddly specific some of them, as you said, but I could never really pinpoint where from or why, but they had numbers, my psychosis, hallucinations, which is very odd, but they had numbers. And it was like I never remembered naming them or giving them numbers. It was like they came with them, which is always a really hard thing to explain. It was like, here's the hallucination, here's its number. But the numbers became quite significant to me as well because they were almost like having names for them, but they used to be a number I wouldn't turn away from or fear. And now that almost seems like angel numbers, something dark, but it's something that I wouldn't change. And they were almost guiding me through something to something better.

Charles: Great. Thank you. So Marcus, you say to us at one point, all your senses hallucinate, but with psychosis, we're often just getting the story about voices and voice hearing all the time. How important are hallucinations in the other senses?

Marcus Gordon: For me, I don't get auditory hallucinations that often. It normally starts off with the sense of touch, my tactile senses. So I'll be like, I can feel something touch me. I can feel something is wet, but then I touch to a different part of my hand or a different part of my body, it'll feel dry. And that's normally the hallucinations I get most frequently. So it'll start off with that, and it'll slowly escalate that or might start seeing like you know the Cheshire cat from... Yeah.

So you get a big toothy smile like that on people's faces, but sometimes you come on the back of the head of the looking away. So it has no rhyme or reason. There's just a big smile where their head is, regardless of where they're looking and then I'll get the sense of smell. So I start smelling rotten stuff like garbage or feces or something like that. And so I get that, but when it comes to hearing stuff, it's very rare. If it is, it's more laughter, but I rarely get to that stage. Because I'm normally overwhelmed by my other senses before it gets that far.

Charles: And this all comes across very strikingly in the film, and Marcus is having to deal with these really quite strong sensory experiences, including the Cheshire cat grins, which people in the room suddenly adopt. You went through quite a lot in terms of that sensory barrage, Marcus.

Marcus Coates: Yeah. It's Marcus Coates speaking. It's quite confusing as we're both being called Marcus, but interesting in the context of making the film because we were each other, we crossed over a lot, I think. But yeah, that sensory barrage and it was a barrage, that was totally overwhelming. And it felt like I spent a lot of time watching the rough cuts. So before we ended watching the footage, I spent a lot of time contesting it, challenging it, trying to be the rational skeptic saying, "well, of course, this is not happening. Of course, I can control this. Of course, I can just not smell that, of course?" and you were so brilliant at saying, "Yeah, how do you think that's going to work? You can't just turn your smell off. Of course, you can't. You can turn your taste and your feelings off. You can turn your touch off, you can't." So getting into that sense of the lack of control was a huge thing for me. And in a way there was a level of acceptance. There was an important barrier that I came across and that was a common theme throughout all the films I think is the struggle I was having got to the

point where actually I can't challenge this anymore. I actually have to go along with it. And that was a transition from rational skeptic to experiencing it really or some level of it.

Charles: So Marcus, the director, you kind of set up a moment when Marcus Coates was going to break and I read that as having a psychotic break. And when that eventually happened, I was expecting, I was anticipating something vivid, flurried, phantasmagorical. I thought it was going to be kaleidoscopic and more of a sensory barrage. Actually, you went completely the other way. You went for silence and you went for blackness. Can you tell us about that?

Marcus Gordon: If you think of it like a fuse box, and you are plugging more and more things into your electrical system to the point it's getting towards being there's too much stuff plugged in there. So there's too much power being drained and then suddenly it just cuts out, that's essentially how it works for me. So it's all this information coming in from my senses being read wrong, the hallucinations being put in time, my brain's not knowing what to do with all this information. Intrusive force, just relentless. It gets to the point where my brain just goes, "I need to protect myself," and it just cuts out and it kind of sends me back to factory default. So it's like I'm a baby or a toddler. That's why I can only say that one thing. And it's just yeah, nothing less.

Charles: There's this word that you both keep repeating right at the end. It's a phrase, is that-

Marcus Gordon: What's going on?

Charles: What's going on? It's an incredibly powerful moment, bringing your film to a close. Does that resonate for anyone else in terms of that sort of sensory overload, the fuse blowing?

Lucy: Yeah, I remember saying in the film, so with even auditory hallucinations, sometimes the stop I found, because it comes to stop, and then the stop box and sometimes made it worse. It was like the break sometimes, then it always made it worse. But I also found it really interesting you talking about the sensors because it was something that's never really talked about as much. Or never taken seriously, I noticed, either because I remember having strange taste in my mouth of chemicals and stuff, but it was never something that everyone would ask me. So you could see a psychiatrist ask you, "How are the hallucinations, were you seeing things?" And they often ask you about that, which I found really interesting that that's something less talked about and it can often be more overwhelming because as you said, you can't turn it off. Whereas obviously, you can't turn the voice off either, but hearing is something you can kind of put music in. With your senses. It's very difficult to switch it off. So yeah, I found that was quite interesting.

Charles: And at one point you say the silence is louder than the voices.

Lucy: Yeah. I found that sometimes when they were gone, it would scare me more than when they were there because them being there was a consistency, a comfort. It became after a while, whereas when they were gone, it was like this whole other level of delusion that they're plotting something. That's something else, the worst is going to happen whilst they're not there. It was a fear of them leaving almost for a while, which was strange when I

actually finally got better. Things were good for a while. That first sort of things being good, I really struggled with because I just was just going to come back worse and worse until I accepted that it was actually going to get better. But yeah, I found silence most louder at times. Yeah.

Stephen: I wish there was enough. You know what I mean? I wished it would stop. I spent 13 years wishing it would stop, but it never did. You know what I mean? The only point I noticed something like that was when I stopped being... Sort of the day I was hospitalised, I think I went from being at the point where me mental health was all due about lack of sleep to actually I felt sort of a pop inside my head and I was like a bubbling child again. And I think that was actually the point where I just broke. I remember that point. But after that, it just would never stop. The only time you would sleep is because of exhaustion and you get some respite. You know what I mean? So just unrelenting, you know what I mean? Just exhausting, draining. Yeah.

Marcus Gordon: Mine was definitely similar to that. Even though I have the break and it gets into that quite bit of nice bit of silence, you're so extremely vulnerable because you can only say one thing and it's the only thing you can think about. So you're about as competent as a baby. Anything can be done to you, and you wouldn't even realise what was going on because you're typically trying to make sense of what's going on around you. But that kind of cognitive thinking is so above where you are at that stage, that you can't even think that much.

And now, luckily for me, it doesn't get to that point every time I have psychosis because otherwise, I would've had three or four those a day and that would just be far more than I could probably handle, but I'd normally get on a daily basis, four or five episodes and I'd have three or four, my senses at least 18, but it'd never go to the full four or five. And I had that every day for 15 years before I sought help for it. And I had to go through university, I'd been to a court case. I had health issues I had to go to. And you always had those psychotic episodes playing while you're trying to hold a normal conversation with people. It's difficult, yeah.