

Marcus Coates & The Directors in conversation

Part 1

Charles: Stephen, with experiences that are so misunderstood and stigmatised, how important was it for you to feel that your own voice of lived experience could be heard? Did it make a difference that you had creative control over the process as opposed to having your experiences portrayed by someone else?

Stephen: It did make a difference. I think it's very important that because of the stigma that I've always believed that we ourselves should share our experience. I don't think it's enough to say for us to just say, oh, we've experienced stigma. We have to explain that our experience to reduce that stigma. That's the way I've always believed anyway. And to be a part of the creative process of something like this was something I've never done before. And the thing I took away from it most was the questioning element of it. I felt like when Marcus was asking me the questions, he really wanted to understand my experience. And there was plenty of times when I was in that dark place where I felt I wasn't being understood. I wasn't being listened to. So, for me, the whole experience was a really positive one. And to be part of it was great. And I think it will make a difference, not just to obviously me from a personal level, but I think it will make a difference to the whole stigma thing and create more understanding

Charles: Because you were the director of that film. It wasn't somebody saying I'm going to take your experience and make something of it. You decided what went into that film.

Stephen: Yeah. Well, the thing is I've never, prior to making this film, gone into so much detail about my paranoia, my delusion. I've never gone into all the intricacies of it quite with anybody, even with a CPN or any clinician. Not with another family member, there's things that I've said in the film that I've never told anybody. So, it feels like it's taken a weight off me. Because part of my delusion was not letting anybody know, because I thought there would be consequences to that. So it takes away that power away from it now. Now I've shared the experience and it gives me some of the power back. So that is what I would take away from it. So that's how it's made me feel thing. So it's been really, really a positive experience. You know what I mean?

Charles: Brilliant. Thank you. That's really good. So just going to ask you if anybody else wants to say something about relation to their own film about that, being in control. How important was it for you to be the person directing the film? If anybody wants to...

Lucy: I just wanted to agree with the fact it does take away the power. I think that psychosis can have when it's usually the one controlling, it's almost like you get a bit of control over the illness itself and by taking control and directing something with your own experience, it's like turning and flipping the switch the other way, which was really powerful for me too.

Marcus Gordon: For me, it was just nice to actually see someone understand what my psychosis was like. Because, I've explained it to professionals before. And they always misrepresented, especially my GPs and doctors. They're always keen to separate it from what it really is. So I might as well actually have control over it and actually portray it as it actually influence.

Charles: Fantastic. So Stephen, you did touch on this question at the second question a bit, but let's do it again anyway. Stephen, how has the experience of making the film changed you and perhaps your relationship to your experiences?

Stephen: Well, now I've made the film, other people are going to see it. So that element of feeling like I had to keep it from everybody is gone. Because, it is going to be known to other people. So it's back to that power thing. It will be known the whole thing, the details I wanted to tell everything, I didn't want it still be carrying little bits of it to myself. It feels like that dark shadow in my past, it's like I've pushed it a bit further back. Do you know what I mean? It feels like you've drawn a line in sand and said, well, actually that's what it was like for me, but this is where I am now. You know what I mean? And that feels important to me. Because, I always felt like I was tied to it somehow.

There's a bit in the film where there's the interaction between me and somebody I know, and the way it's portrayed in the film, you see that I believe that I shouldn't be talking to that person. Not that I believe bad of that person, but because I believe that they're being used to get to me. And I felt really guilty for that for a long time. And I've never told anybody that before nobody who knows me, knows my mind was telling me that not to talk to people, because it would be used against me. And these were people I know. So to actually be put in that film, it feels like I'm relieving that weight. And if I share it with people, when it becomes online, they will find that out for the first time. You know what I mean? So it'll improve their understanding and stuff like that. And I think improving people's understanding is the idea that is what's going to happen. That is what's going to reduce the stigma at the end of the day.

Charles: There's a really powerful bit where you're on the street and you meet a mate, an old mate, and you're having what seems to us a really nice chat with him. It's all going great. And then something is telling you that you've got to stop talking to him now, and you kind of make your excuses and leave.

Stephen: Yeah, it's weird when that happens, because these people were generally concerned about me. They were actually taking an interest, but what my head was telling me, when something he said triggered it, it affected those relationships. That is one of the reasons why I became so isolated. And it was an isolating experience. I sat staring at the TV that wasn't turned on day and night for six years. Because I believed that if I made one mistake, I would lose everything. My Liberty would be gone. And it took so much of my life. In total, it was 13 years. My late twenties, and it affected so many things, and relationships is one of them. You need people around you when you're in a dark place, and for your head to be including them in that and to be affecting those relationships.

It wasn't helpful. It was quite a distressing element to it. So it wasn't me, but you're not in control of your mind. Your mind's shut down from reality and it's telling you all kinds of things constantly. You know what I mean? It can bounce off something that somebody said and sit and hit with something you're like, fight or flight. I better get out of here. You know what I mean? And that's what it was like for me for a long time.

Charles: Fantastic. Anybody else want to comment on this question of how making the film has changed you, maybe your relationship with your experiences? A few things have come up today actually about people's loved one, seeing what you've done. And how do you feel

about maybe that? People who you know have seen what you've done. Any thoughts on that? Anybody want to add something there?

Lucy: I think I wanted to say probably that having people who were with me the whole way through that experience and have stuck by me, being able to show them that part of me that was almost missing for a while and where that went, I think would be quite important to me. Where I was in my head, but almost physically as well as somewhere else. And explaining that to them, and also maybe explaining why I wasn't there for them, why they were for me. It's almost like, yeah, explanation I could never give, which would be really important.

Charles: Mark, I wanted to ask where you are in the experiences that are brought to life in your film. Where Marcus is walking through the park, and you are talking to him that felt like a particular kind of internal conversation. And when he's being assaulted suddenly and randomly you talk about fighting against, you cannot control you. Explain that the attacker is also you. I mean, have I got that right? And how does it feel to see that internal battle of played out on the screen in front of you?

Mark: Well, in those days it was kind of... Where the film was set was definitely a case of basically exactly how I felt. When you're going up the hill was set when I was 23 in 2000. And that feeling of intensity was pretty shit to be fair. And so that's reflective on going up the hill on May's Hill when Marcus goes up the hill. And so that feeling of intensity, you start off thinking, well, this is life. This is just how it is. So eventually you cross through that wall, through that fence, through that gate. And then suddenly everything becomes kind of distorted and intense and a little bit kind of intense and shit. And so you're climbing that hill. Marcus is climbing that hill and there I am just shouting abuse at him to really intensify that feeling while he climbs that hill. Where you start questioning everything, you start questioning absolutely everything.

And I don't know, the jealousy that you have against someone or just blatantly knowing that your whole world is collapsing. Your girlfriend is going to disappear. Everything that you've worked so hard for just can go in a snap. You're going up the hill and everything that you worked on just suddenly collapses and you just know that everything is just going to be crap zone. And so you go up there and the ghost is that little sucker, the bruiser who just wax Marcus and you go, whoa, and that's the whole point of that. The whole kind of, oh my gosh. And then that goes into the next phase of my own psychosis situation. So that's basically that.

Marcus Coates: I remember you talking about the intrusive thoughts.

Mark: Oh god.

Marcus Coates: And then you're describing them. And I was saying, what's it feel like you said, it feels like they punched the stomach.

Mark: Yes!!

Marcus Coates: So we thought, well, we need to get someone to punch me in the stomach. So, you're feeding me with all these paranoid thoughts, which in a way started to feel like my thoughts.

Mark: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Marcus Coates: And then this physical feeling was on top of that. And with that. It felt like we were trying to do it verbally and physically.

Mark: Yeah. Well, at the beginning of COVID, everything was changing. And so, in my own mind, I was feeling a bit intense in my own little self. And that's when we started doing this project. And it was exactly like that. I had this intense intrusive thought, and it was a little five-year-old just punching me in the stomach like that. And in the case of that particular scene, you getting whacked was kind of symbolic, to some extent, of that exact situation.

Charles: So the mystery assailant is you beating yourself up and Marcus, there was a really interesting bit in your film where you talk about, I think you say your mind hates you. Is there something of the same kind of thing going on there? Do you think?

Marcus Gordon: I think it's because I've suffered from mental health issues since I was a kid, started in primary school. So I've always had intrusive thoughts of death, suicide and existential kind of thoughts since I was eight years old. So I'm used to my mind always making me feel like crap. And when my psychosis started, it just kind of took that into overdrive. I started to really feel like my mind was going out of its way just to ruin my life. Because I couldn't even do basic things. Stepping outside my front door. I would start to feel loosely just coming on. My anxiety would spike, and it just became a living hell. And just could go on three or four times a day and it could last several hours a day. And it went like that for about 15 years before it started getting better.

Charles: Anybody want to add anything on that topic of being at war with yourself, and your mind hating your mind turning on itself?

Mark: Well, it's kind of like there are two of us. It sounds weird, but they're kind of two of us, but there aren't two of us. Because my argument was always, this is not me. Me is somewhere else. But this is 90% of what, but the 10% is the me, but where is the me and who is the 90% of what this is? I don't know how to explain that. But the bottom line is, I mean, I was trying to explain to everybody before we eventually got the diagnosis, that this is not me. This is not me. And I guess that's what that ghost is, who came along and whacked Marcus.

Marcus Coates: In the film, you explain it in that percentage way, which I found very interesting and useful in that you said, okay, this stage of the walk, we're 90/10. So you are 90 you and you're 10, not you.

Mark: Oh yeah, yeah.

Marcus Coates: And then this stage of the walk, you are 70/30. Oh yeah. And then now we're into 90/10. The 10 is you, the 90 is not you. I imagine you were saying you are not in control of and your thoughts are basically.

Mark: This is not me. Exactly.

Marcus Coates: So that was what I kind of struggled with at many points when it became quite intense, especially in the Codanard area where I blindfolded in the columns in the

Naval college, where you were saying, this is you, this is not you. This is you. This is not you.

Mark: Yeah, because this isn't me, but it isn't you, but it is you, but it's not you.

Marcus Coates: But negotiating where I was with all of that and imagining you negotiating, that was really, really confusing.

Mark: Yeah. That's exactly what it was. You just kind of give in to whatever the hell is happening. Because, you don't know what's... That's all I can say on that.

Stephen: It does feel like you're fighting a battle in inside your own head. It feels like you're trapped in there. You know what I mean? And it's just like, there was always days for me where I questioned what my mind was telling us. I questioned delusions, but because of how constant it was. And because of the fact that my mind was constantly turning, there were other days, probably 80% of the time where I was too tired and I was too exhausted to sort fight it. So it took over, it was in control. It was in the driving seat. You know what I mean? And you are having to interact with the people you know, and your mind shut down from reality. And it was just sort of... And how do you keep it hidden? You know what I mean? Which is what I did. Just put on a mask and just practice sitting there and not doing anything to show anybody. And it's just the being trapped inside your own head. It is a dark chapter. It's a dark place sometimes.

Charles: Any other thoughts on that internal battle?

Marcus Gordon: I think for me it's less of internal battle and more like my body's let me down. Because, mine started because I overindulged with drugs, which caused drug and G psychosis. And then that came linked to anxiety. So it became anxiety in G psychosis. And it's like, all these things were going wrong simply because my brain no longer seems to process my senses properly anymore. And it's like, if it just did its job properly, then I won't have these issues. So it's like, it's not a war. It's just that my body's now just let me down basically.

Charles: Brilliant. Thank you.

Mark, one of the most memorable things about your film is your discussion with Marcus about trust and Marcus is saying to you, "I've been a place where I feel I can't trust what's going on, but I've just moved here from a place where I can trust what's going on." And Marcus is reflecting on the fact that it's not being in one place or the other. It's about moving between the two and not being sure which one of those places you're in any one time.

Marcus Coates: Because when Ivo was pushing me along or helping me along and I was blindfolded. I felt okay. I can trust this guy. And I couldn't see where I was going, and I thought, okay, there might be a fall at any point, but he was going to help me. And then suddenly he wouldn't be there. And suddenly he'd be pushing me around, spinning me and tripping me up. And I could deal with either of those.

Mark: Which one?

Marcus Coates: I could deal with either of them. Not trusting him or trusting him. I could deal with that. What I couldn't deal with was trusting, and then not trusting. It's just a change. I couldn't deal with that. And the unpredictably. When is this not trusting going to come? The anticipation of it? I felt that was the hardest thing to deal with.

Mark: Well, I know exactly what you're talking about, because that was totally reflected when, we're in Arizona and it was snowing. This was in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. And I remember going out in the middle of the night at 4:00 in the morning or something like that. And up to the knees and snow at least. And thinking I was a CIA agent or maybe a night of the realm. And I would walk out, I don't know, a hundred yards from the little hut. And then I would turn around thinking the KGB were after me. So, I would try to retrace those little snow steps back into little hut and hope that nobody would see me.

I thought to myself, if the KGB catch me and find out who my friends are and who their friends are and who my family are and who their families are, then they're going to kill all of us. And so I guess in reality, that would be when Marcus is blindfolded.

Whereas at other times, during my trip in Arizona, before I got treatment for my illness, I would have conversations with my mom and dad and my aunt and uncle. And we would have a normal conversation. But that's when I was normal. So it's like there was this chequered normal then crazy, normal, then crazy, normal, delusions, normal, delusions. And then once I got my medication, the delusions left and whatever happened afterwards, the negative symptoms were just terrible, but we got over that. But yeah, that's exactly what it was Marcus. It was you're in the columns and you're being looked after, and then stop, stop, by Mr. Bruiser and then push, push by Mr. Bruiser. Because you have this mosaic of what the hell is going on, what the hell is going on. And that's the situation, basically.

Charles: On that theme of trust, you say something really interesting in your film, Marcus, which made me sit up and go, whoa. You say, "You can't trust your feelings." And then we are familiar with the idea of not being able to trust your senses in all sorts of ways, including with hallucinations in psychosis. But you were saying you can't even trust how you're feeling. Can you say a bit more about that?

Marcus Gordon: Oh, if you can even remember saying that.

Marcus Coates: You said, as soon as Mark was speaking, Mark's quote, you said, you said, Our feelings facts. Do you remember?

Marcus Gordon: Yes. So because I come from a psychology background, much like yourself, I kind of know a lot about thinking errors and stuff like that. So I always come back to the fact that people could often confuse feelings for facts. And when you can't trust your own reality, because you don't know if you are living in the same kind of universe, everybody else, you then know that you're feeling like your wet or your reality is different. People are smiling, even though you're looking at the back of the heads. You know it's not real, but at the same time, you're not sure if you can believe that it's not real. Because you doubt your own reality. So it just creates this whole kind of feedback loop where you don't like, you can't trust your sentences. You can't trust your feelings. You can't even trust your own brain anymore. So it's makes you feel really isolated.

Charles: Any other thoughts on it?

Lucy: Interesting, because I almost felt the opposite. I only remember from our film, we talked about how feelings is the only thing I felt I could trust. It was really interesting because I felt like I couldn't trust my thoughts. Couldn't trust people around me, the environment around me, but what I was feeling felt real like the realest thing in the world, which is kind of strange as you said, but I don't know, real feelings felt like the only thing that felt real because I could really feel it. Whereas everything else felt distant, disconnected and just not trustworthy. So I was like almost the opposite around feelings, the only thing I could trust are instinct and gut intuition. Yeah.

Charles: Anthony, I'm aware that you haven't had a chance to see each other's films yet. And I thought watching your film, that environments and situations are very important in mental health. What did it mean for you to choose this particular setting for your film?

Anthony: So the domestic setting is about where most of your recovery takes place or where you spend most of your time. And the fact of the relationships within that setting, which are very, very important and are actually very important towards recovery, and so I chose that particular setting as well to demonstrate what it's like inside the home versus outside.

Anthony: Versus outside. And even when you are in a place that's supposed to be a place of safety, you can still feel vulnerable, or there can still be those issues that just, they may be less kind of obvious. I noticed someone earlier was speaking about how they try their best to hide their situation, and you do. And it's about trying to create an environment for yourself where you can feel safe.

Charles: And how does that work in terms of recovery? The idea of going back to the old places where you used to feel a particular way, where you had experiences of a particular kind?

Anthony: It's difficult and through past experience, it's not always helpful. So it's something that's very important, I think, when it comes to recovery, when people that are assisting you with that recovery are assisting you in a way that is going to help you continue to progress in recovery, rather than you feeling like you've gone back to square one, or that it can happen all over again.

Charles: Any other thoughts on environments, situations, context at the actual settings of your films?

Lucy: Not so much the setting of the film, but I found the question interesting about recovery setting, because I know when I went back to my room and stayed back in my room like I did a bit with normal after feeling a bit better. And after a particularly difficult time, I said to my mom, "I can't stay in here because I can remember exactly where everything was at the time and how it felt." So we redecorated my whole room after I'd got to a good place. And I actually do it a lot now when I've had a bad time. And then when I get to a better place, I need a whole new environment because there's that... You can't recover in the same environment that made you sick. And even though that environment isn't necessarily bad, but seeing the things that remind you of the things that were bad, I remember I couldn't have

purple lights for a long time. It was random things like that. It's mad, but having an entirely different, more positive environment that's more you, changed my recovery a lot.

Anthony: See, I'm used to moving very regular every two years. I've moved over 22 times already in my lifetime. And the environment is very important. And I think what you just identified there, that you would struggle to recover in a place where you became ill and the things that remind you of that, it is difficult. And to move past something, you actually have to move on from it, and I think that's the same with environmental spaces as well.

Marcus Gordon: I think it's very different to my experience because mine's triggered about, even if I leave the house, every environment is a reminder. Every environment I've had psychotic episode in, so it's less about the environment for me.

Stephen: Sort of a bit switch for me now, because during that period, I spent a lot of time in the house. And although I felt like I was still being watched when I was in the house, it felt less than the danger I would be in if I walked outside. Whereas now, probably because of all the time I did spend in the house, it makes me feel worse being in the house. I don't know, because it's a constant reminder and because I can go out now, I want to be out every single day. And just the thought of having to stop in for somebody's coming to serves you by. And I'm like, "Well, is it more in the afternoon because I can't stop in all day." Do you know what I mean? I'd climb in the wall if I'm in the house now. Whereas I spent so many years just feeling like I couldn't go out. So it's been a complete switch around. So it's just strange how the mind works and the tricks it can play and place it can take.

Marcus Coates: Yeah. I find it interesting that using the domestic setting. I mean Lucy, Stephen and Anthony all situated their films in a domestic home setting. And for me, being in that setting, that just says safety, normalness, all these things. But what was brought home to me was how these ordinary, benign environments became places of stress and unimaginable, overwhelming problems and stimulus. So yeah, for me now being in my domestic environment, I see it as a sanctuary, but I'm aware of all of your experiences too. And it really makes me feel like, "Yes, this is for me now very safe." And for me to take that calmness and safeness, I don't take off for granted so much anymore.

Charles: I did notice that in your reaction in Anthony's film where it was one of the times where you did seem to be getting emotionally engaged. And it makes sense for me now, hearing you talk about that, expecting a domestic setting to be benign and neutral and you were not expecting to find that distress at home.

Marcus Coates: Yeah. I mean the smallest thing, my mom in Anthony's film coming to tidy up. It's not a big deal, but with all these voices in there and all the other stuff going on, it was just too much to bear. And I felt just literally pinned to the sofa. I felt immobile. I couldn't express myself. It was all coming in. My voice almost didn't work at that point. So in a way, re-watching it now I was thinking, "Is that really coming across?" I don't know if it does, but actually being in that with Anthony and Anthony talking me through that and these actors around me doing this stuff, I really felt this compression. It was a physical thing.