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Welcome to the third Issue of One + One

Filmmakers Journal

One+One is comprised of interviews, essays and reports covering all aspects of film making and film exhibition. It is unlikely that you will find film reviews in these pages; personal reflection and opinion are certainly present, but it is not our aim to give bite-size opinions on the merit of individual films. Instead, we want to encourage discussion and debate about approaches to film making, and a deeper questioning into the nature, and future, of the production and exhibition of films.

In each issue, we bring you interviews, essays and reports written by creators, for creators and for those interested in the artist s process. Rather than something separate, we see analysis and criticism as being another part of the creative process. These articles feed in to our own work, and we hope that – whether you agree with their content or not – they inspire you in some way to do something yourself.

This issue is both a celebration and a warning for those in pursuit of the independent and oppositional path. Chris Brown champions the focused vision of the critic-defying John Cassavetes and Samuel Kershaw discovers truly great comedy never ages. James Marcus Tucker finds that a British independent filmmaker – *Ron Peck* – can productively straddle experimentation and "industry", and James Riley explores how the cinema of Peter Whitehead is used to overthrow our collective inertia. Daniel Fawcett's discovery of Sussex based artist/filmmaker Jeff Keen, however, helps little to encourage the fledgling artist determined to toe the anti-industry/anti-commercial path. But this path must be trod - at least by the determined few - according to Bradley Tuck; for it is with them that our next Enlightenment will come.

Please take a look at our new website **www.filmmakersjournal.co.uk** where you'll be able to read articles from previous issues of **One+One** and find links to our Facebook and Twitter page where you'll be able to keep up to date with news and events.

For those of you interested in writing, please see the submissions section of our website or contact **submissions@filmmakersjournal.co.uk** for more information.

Daniel Fawcett and James Marcus Tucker

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Directors Under the Influence

Learning from John Cassavetes

Chris Brown

The term independent cinema has become increasingly problematic in recent years: much of what I ve watched in festivals or online lately seems to be independent in financial terms only. Sitting in the cinema waiting for a film to begin, I m sure we ve all seen the Virgin Media shorts which champion undiscovered talent or the Volkswagen supports independent cinema spots encouraging us to 'See Film Differently.' Yet judging by the evidence onscreen, much of this talent might be better off left undiscovered, creating space instead for those who really do see film differently. Much supposedly alternative work bears Hollywood s indelible imprint. But to be truly independent is to be free from the influence or control of others. Whether as part of a production company or as an aspiring amateur armed with nothing but a camera, the nature of Hollywood's insidious influence must be understood and challenged.

John Cassavetes was a pioneering figure in independent cinema. He started out as an actor, and is known today for his appearances in hits such as The *Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). He made his directorial debut in 1959 with *Shadows*, an impressionistic, jazz-infused study of interracial relations in New York, which had much in common with the work of the Beat Generation. The way in which Cassavetes financed it has entered film folklore: he asked listeners on a late-night radio show to each send him a dollar; by the end of the week he had received over $2,000 in contributions, mostly in the form of single-dollar bills.[1] After a brief, unhappy spell directing two studio films in Hollywood, Cassavetes earned widespread recognition with his second independent work, *Faces* (1968), which depicted a bored middle-class couple tempted by adultery. His wife, Gena Rowlands, played a supporting role. This formidably talented actress would appear in five more of his films.

Cassavetes challenged basic Hollywood form, the two crucial components of which are story and visual presentation. Hollywood films generally adhere to a classic, three-act plot structure (beginning, middle, end), and last between ninety minutes and two hours. Important plot points are clearly signaled. Each character has a clearly-defined motivation or backstory. Visually, establishing shots are cut back and forth between medium-range close-ups of individual characters, broadly following conventions like the 180-degree rule. Artistry in the visuals is rendered subordinate to the basic impulse of telling of a clear, linear story: edited together, shots create an illusion of time and space that is easily accessible to an audience.

Cassavetes defied these conventions. His films were long, clocking in at two-and-a-half hours or more, shortened

from director's cuts which sometimes ran for seven or eight hours. Important plot points were deliberately withheld. Tension was built up only for the expected moments of climax or catharsis never to emerge. A great deal of screen time (sometimes twenty or thirty minutes) was devoted to scenes which most films would have avoided altogether, in which nothing in particular seems to happen, and the audience is left to work out the meaning for themselves. Character motivation often remains obscure. Instead, the focus is on moral and emotional disintegration: a focus sustained by the capture of physical performance. Cassavetes typically employs static long shots of the characters movements within their domestic environments, combined with extreme, freewheeling, hand-held close-ups, going in and out of focus, tracking the faces of the characters.

His most famous film was probably *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). It depicts the mentally ill, working-class housewife Mabel (Rowlands) who is increasingly unable to cope with living alongside her domineering husband Nick (Peter Falk). The film provoked extreme reactions: prominent critics were noticeably aggressive (Pauline Kael: "self-righteous ineptitude," Stanley Kauffmann: "utterly without interest or merit," John Simon: "muddle-headed, pretentious and interminable"). The jury of that year's New York Film Festival (headed by Susan Sontag, Andrew Sarris, Molly Haskell, Richard Roud, and Richard Corliss) rejected it on the grounds that it had no 'ending' (it eventually screened after Martin Scorsese withdrew one of his films in protest). Another source of contention was that Mabel was depicted as an abject, passive victim, unable to take action and offered no escape from her situation.

Just what was the 'influence' of the film's title? Arguably, it is best understood in the context of Cassavetes' driving interest in the act of performance, the roles people are forced to play in their everyday lives. Nick is attracted to Mabel, "but only when they are alone," the director explained, "Being embarrassed in front of his family and friends is against all 'rules.' Society, embarrassment, his relatives, his men, his feeling that he is doing the right thing, all of this background comes between them."[2] Nick's role (the working-class family breadwinner with patriarchal authority) is sanctioned by society, whereas Mabel s inability to conform to an acceptable role (the respectable housewife) is not. Culturally-conditioned, popular myths outlining the ways in which people 'should' behave were not only inadequate when faced with reality, but actively destructive, precipitating pain and trauma when people failed to make the grade. Cassavetes was not alone in realising that Hollywood, along with other mass media, had been complicit in disseminating these ideological myths. But crucially, he understood that the reason it had been so successful was that audiences had, over the years, through sheer repetition, been trained into a particular *way of seeing*.

" A great deal of screen time (sometimes twenty or thirty minutes) was devoted to scenes which most films would have avoided altogether "

He explained that films depend on "a shorthand for living. You recognise certain incidents and you go with them. People

John Cassavetes, Image Courtesy of UCLA Film & Television Archives

'shorthand for living' – its formal conventions – was to tacitly accept, whether one liked it or not, its myths and misconceptions regarding how life should be conceived. Cassavetes had a first-hand understanding of Hollywood's deadening effect, frequently referring to much of his film acting in terms of prostitution to the system: he had done it because he needed the money. It is clear that his work was often unfulfilling, when one examines such films as Brian DePalma's Freudian-horror *The Fury (1978)*. At the film's climax, the villainous character played by Cassavetes explodes - thirteen times, in slow motion, from a plethora of different camera angles - after being penetrated by the energy of the vengeful female protagonist's telepathic orgasm. You can watch it on YouTube.

prefer that you condense; they find it quite natural for life to be condensed in films. They like it 'canned.' It's easy for them. They prefer that because they can catch onto the meanings and keep ahead of the movie. But that's boring. I won't make shorthand films. In my films there s a competition with the audience to keep ahead of them. I want to break their patterns. I want to shake them up and get them out of those quick, manufactured truths.'[3]

"I won't make shorthand films. In my films there's a competition with the audience to keep ahead of them"

Form and content were inextricable. To unquestioningly accept Hollywood's

Cassavetes conceived his films in opposition to this kind of nonsense. Many critics found his style home-movie-like, but this, ironically, was what he wanted. He distrusted what 'professionalism' in Hollywood cinema had come to represent.

Instead, he offered an alternate vision of filmmaking as an interactive process. His great originality was to understand his constricted circumstances and make everything and everyone around him *part of* his filmmaking. He financed his films using the earnings from his acting, and occasionally re-mortgaged his house. He cast family (his wife, mother, mother-in-law, children), friends, and sometimes himself, in his films. He worked with a tiny crew, so that anyone who happened to be on set (including actors) learnt the basics of camerawork and shot footage. He filmed largely on location interiors, including his own house and those of friends and relatives: in *A Woman Under the Influence*, we never see inside one of the rooms in the house, because it served as his makeshift office.

“ The actors were encouraged to explore different ways of interpreting their dialogue, which often resulted in rows or disagreements ”

The images onscreen were unpolished and unprofessional by Hollywood standards. Booms frequently appear in shot; some footage is overexposed; actors constantly block each other; sound problems meant that dialogue often had to be synched or re-recorded afterwards. But for Cassavetes, none of this mattered as long as the film’s emotional momentum was maintained via a tight focus on the performers. The dialogue in his films was not improvised as is often alleged, but carefully scripted. What is true is that the actors were encouraged to explore different ways of interpreting their dialogue, which often resulted in rows or disagreements, as people inevitably had different opinions about their characters. Yet these tensions did not damage the films but enhanced them. Both on and off screen, life was a process whereby people worked things out amongst themselves. Cassavetes remarked that filming *Faces*, for example, “became a way of life.”[4]

The numerous difficulties Cassavetes encountered in getting his films released have been well documented. Despite the negative reviews, he tirelessly promoted *A Woman Under the Influence*, to the extent that it gradually built up its own momentum: remarkably, he and Rowlands went on to snag Oscar nominations for direction and acting. This success was not to be repeated, unless one counts *Gloria* (1980), his more mainstream, studio-produced crime thriller. But *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), *Opening Night* (1977), and *Love Streams* (1984) enjoyed no commercial and limited critical success. In this sense, the overlap between life and art had its downside: when Cassavetes died at the age of fifty-nine of cirrhosis of the liver (like many of his characters, he was an alcoholic), the feeling amongst those who knew him best was that the sheer effort involved in getting his films made had ultimately burnt him out. But his restless energy resulted in some of the most powerful film art I have ever seen. My personal favourite is *Opening Night*, depicting the emotional and physical breakdown of a theatre actress (Rowlands) in the run-up to the first performance of her new play. I go back to it again and again, each time mesmerized, allowing myself to get lost in its shifting mazes of art and reality.

Cassavetes was prepared to risk making a fool of himself if things didn t work out – and sometimes they didn’t. There are

aspects of some of his films which I don't think work for one reason or another, but considering that much of his experimentation worked so spectacularly elsewhere, who cares? For Cassavetes, it was better to be bored or irritated with a film than to simply consume it unquestioningly. Many filmmakers today seem reluctant to risk upsetting their audiences. Even though their ideas might be thematically or ideologically daring, in condensing them into standardised story forms, and employing similarly conventional visuals, their claim to be truly 'independent' is compromised.

Worryingly, Hollywood form is so ingrained in our sensibilities that many new filmmakers barely seem to realise its implications. But the fact is, by shooting and editing in a particular way, you *do* subscribe to a set of values, whether you like it or not: it's a way of seeing things. The Hollywood influence is insidious. It retains dominance by virtue of the fact that it is never questioned, that few people ever consider questioning it, that most of the time they don't even realise it exists. Many new directors end up subsumed into an 'alternative' which is not only defined by the mainstream, but inevitably ends up reinforcing its strength. From Cassavetes we can learn this: amateurism is a virtue if it encourages independent thought. The bulk of Hollywood films are boring. They're trite. They're predictable. They're unimaginative. Many are ideologically suspect. Let's not remain under their influence.

1. Marshall Fine, *Accidental Genius: How John Cassavetes Invented the American Independent Film* (New York: Hyperion, 2005) p79-80

2. *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, ed. Ray Carney (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) p369

3. Ray Carney, *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p282

4. Ivone Margulies, 'John Cassavetes: Amateur Director,' in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) p286

Cinema Revolution or the End of Enlightenment

Bradley Tuck

Still from *Monkey Dust*

It is late at night; Clive solemnly walks down a generic London backstreet. He passes an electrical store where stacks of televisions show Tony Blair promising a better future, but the boarded up shops and rundown streets do nothing to substantiate his pledges. A car alarm sounds in the distance as Kylie Minogue s Can t Get You Out Of My Head" bellows out from an overbearing tower block. The concrete city looms above him. Clive slowly walks up the stairs of his tower block and unlocks his door. He walks in to a dimly lit flat to find his wife waiting for him.

"*It's midnight, you left the office at six o'clock. Where have you been Clive?*"

Unable to imagine a better excuse, Clive recounts a familiar yet unbelievable tale. Her stern face remains unchanged…

"That's actually the plot of "Hotel California" by the Eagles. Where have you been Clive?"

His head sinks and he looks downwards in shame, "*I ve been spit-roasting a hooker with your Dad*".

•

Such is the portrait of Noughties Britain in the BBC3 Animated TV series *Monkey Dust*. Set against the backdrop of a gritty urban nightmare, the characters struggle for some sensory hedonistic escape. Clive seeks to escape the banality of his existence, but all transgression and all hope ends in failure. Far from liberating him, Clive's act of "spit-roasting a hooker" does nothing but reinforce the painful triviality of his day-to-day survival. In the world of *Monkey Dust*, Blair -The New Hope, has not saved us. The Blairite and Thatcherite worlds could hardly be distinguished. If Labour had

once been a party of hope, this was no longer; hope lies strewn in the gutter.

The End of Hope?

Haloed by a sprinkle of politically correct multiculturalism, the so-called "Left" shifted from class politics and equality to diversity and identity. Mixing Affirmative Action with Thatcherite Neo-Liberalism, these new Centralists could now say that even if the gap between rich and poor was growing, at least both rich and poor would be more ethnically and sexually diverse.

Stalinism was over, but so was most Libertarian Communism and Socialism. Now the bricks of the Berlin wall were being re-built in the name of capitalist hegemonies. Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" [1] has been almost universally internalised by most major political parties. Cultural Studies courses also internalised the end of Socialism, privileging race, gender and sexuality, but ignoring class. Sub-cultural movements shifted towards apathetic meandering or mindless escapism adopting figures such as Jordan and Marilyn Manson in contrast to the politically vibrant John Lennon and Johnny Rotten of decades gone by. However, if the Enlightenment is over, the need for it grows evermore. Whilst Market-led capitalists grow stronger, they become increasingly unable to divert the risk of environmental catastrophe and the increasing divide between rich and poor. Placing our faith in "the invisible hand of the Market" does nothing to secure a fruitful and flourishing continuation of the human species. In 2007 the UNDP reported that "The 40 percent of the world's population living on less than US$2 a day accounts for 5% of the global income. The richest 20 percent accounts for three quarter of the world income"[2]. A world legitimated by Human Rights Laws has not done enough to support those too poor to afford them.

The putrid state of the modern human condition breeds inequality of the most degrading and despicable kind. However, help is at hand in the form of "kind philanthropists" (Bono, Madonna or Bill Gates) who *generously* give the scraps off the side of their plates, keeping for themselves only a few excessive millions or billions. With these *small* excesses they could only save a few extra billion lives, and so they put their efforts into *more important things* like owning private jets, carrying little dogs in bags and snorting cocaine with Bill Clinton. They flurry and fuss about the dire state on the world with the subconscious hope that this serves to distract from and justify the vast greed and despicable evil they hold in their wallets. They are much akin to the Plantation owners who let their slaves go to church on Sundays, justifying their evil through minimal acts of generosity.

The Western celebration of the end of slavery should be completely mocked for this farcical absurdity. With an estimated 27 million people living in slavery[3], celebratory rhetoric only hides the true reality. In a world with an increasing divide between rich and poor, venerability makes possible the trading of people on a mass scale. If the causes of slavery are poverty and venerability then the path of modern liberal capitalism only perpetuates it.

With the excluded and disenfranchised still in need of a voice and with the demise of the mainstream Left, those left by the wayside find a voice in the far-Right groups, such as Al Qaeda and the BNP, whose ultra-traditionalism offers "liberation" to its supporters but a dark icy night of repression to anyone in the world

who does not or cannot assimilate. The demand for us to think and re-think our world and our order becomes increasingly pressing. The Enlightenment narrative of continual progress can only be *fully* endorsed by those who are wealthy, short-sighted or pig-ignorant enough to perceive it.

With the Western media closely aligned with the Washington Consensus and the art-world becoming increasingly caught up in the cultural colonisation of the social reality and dominated by consumerist logic, the need for artistic resistance becomes ever more urgent. As art, especially film, becomes increasingly concerned with what is marketable and can be tailored to bring in large audiences, the function of such films becomes not to elevate humanity but rather to give people "*what they want*" or, more to the point, what executives think will sell. However, artistic resistance has become equally banal. On the one hand, the appropriation of avant-garde rhetoric is used to justify the artist's lack of subversivity and serves to produce only an elite bourgeoisie experience. The most notorious example is certain strains of Performance Art, which despite its subversive intentions ends up serving exclusively a status buffing, pseudo art-loving, mentally-impotent 'intellectual' elite who can watch in horror and fascination as Franco B bleeds or as Orlan undergoes cosmetic surgery in front of a live audience. Similarly, the artistic preoccupation with identity politics, however noble and progressive, often enforces, rather than subverts, the dominant ideology. In a world where Western political parties legitimate themselves with the rhetoric of identity politics and liberal democratic compromise, such art is often co-opted for their own personal agenda. For example, identity politics risks losing its subversive potential in a world where even the Tories have floats at gay pride parades. The "good old days" where Tories were Tories and Commies were Commies is over.

" If the causes of slavery are poverty and venerability then the path of modern liberal capitalism only perpetuates it. "

In such a situation, the Art world is lead down the path of apathetic misdirection, sensual escapism, aesthetic and conceptual pre-occupations or commercial inanity, rather than toward anything that is genuinely progressive. If Art and Filmmaking as a vocation is in crisis, couldn't Filmmaking (and Art) as vocations also provide some form of remedy? In light of this, what ought to be the vocation of the filmmaker of the future? In what ways does filmmaking contain what is needed for the becoming of a new humanity and a new order?

1. Subverting the Process

The characters in John Waters *Cecil B. Demented* take a vow of chastity and a set of rules aimed at purifying cinema. On course they subvert the process of filmmaking on a grand scale. They kidnap, shoot, disrupt and die in order to bring about an end to bad Hollywood movies. Through their set of rules they transform the cinema into a revolutionary act, where the actors become activists and the film project becomes an attempt to bring about social change, rather than merely commenting on it. Their film stops being merely an aesthetic form

Still from *Cecil B. Demented*

and also becomes a revolutionary act, in a similar way to how French culture slips from La Nouvelle Vague into the Paris riots of May '68. The process of cinema-making at its most radical promises to turn film into a radical Vanguard. Film no longer simply tries to represent the world from a distance, it tries to change it.

Waters' film has parallels with the filmmakers of the Dogme95 movement. Whilst more moderate in ambition, the Dogme95 manifesto still contains radical import. The founders of Dogme95 sought a new order by creating rules that would purify filmmaking. Amongst other things, these rules demanded that the filmmaker make their films on location without the aid of props and sets, that they used a handheld camera, did not use optics or filters and did not make a 'genre film'. These rules served as an outline for a new order designed to both increase the freedom of the filmmaker and decrease reliance on money or budgets to avoid Hollywood cliché. Sometimes the radicalism of Dogme95 was not so apparent in the content of these films, rather, its radicalism was the way that it engaged and attempted to change the social mechanisms of filmmaking itself. Questions of how a film is financed, how it divides its labour and creates hierarchies are concerns that contribute to the becoming of Filmmaking as a vocation. Film should be prepared to practice what it preaches and this implies revolutions in process as well as content.

However, this doesn't mean that Hollywood isn t laced with a little radicalism of its own. The emigration of European directors (Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Edward Dmytryk, Nicholas Ray etc.) to America's shores during the Second World War created a foreign element in the development of America's film style. Faced with a new alien environment of McCarthy paranoia and suspicion, their depiction of the American-Hollywood dream was unsettling. The name for this unsettling vision was Film Noir. Implicit within this Hollywood formula is a suspicion of it. At certain moments American cinema creates discordances that point to its own dark side. In Billy Wilder s *Sunset Boulevard* and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* the vision of Hollywood is ruptured in a distinctly Hollywood way revealing its dark underbelly. However, if Hollywood is laced with the dream of its own demise, this does not mean that it will be brought crashing down. On the contrary, Hollywood's internal self-criticism does nothing to undermine the industry which allows it to function. Just as 60s protest music and 70s punk is neutered by the industries that re-invents them, Hollywood re-invents and re-claims moments of its own transgression. However, transgressions are not without radical import, in this respect that we can talk of a contrary motion where the dormant radicalism of Douglas Sirk's melodramas and other Hollywood motifs are re-claimed by European radicals like Fassbinder and Godard. There is a to-ing and fro-ing between Hollywood and its antithesis, which can only achieve its real potential when critical elements are brought to the fore.

2. Film as Social Criticism

In Kalatozov's *Soy Cuba*, Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange*, Godard s Weekend, Solondz s *Palandromes* and Von Trier s *Dogville* aesthetic devices are used to direct the audience's attention towards its social content. In this sense, these films are continuous with Brecht's Epic Theatre which aimed to distance the audience from the action and turn the audience's attention to critical engagement with what was happening on the stage. To achieve this Brecht sought to continually disrupt the realism with "alienation devices" (*Verfremdungseffekts*) "such as characters talking directly to the audience, a "detached" style of acting, captions, projections, posters, song and dance"[4]. These mechanisms would rupture the narrative causing the audience to reflect upon the social content of the piece.

The narrators in *Soy Cuba* and *Dogville* play a similar role, turning the audience's attention to the social content of the story. The story, or stories, do not require strong emotional engagement, but are instead reminiscent of biblical tales taking the form of moral parables upon which to reflect. In *Soy Cuba*, the Narrator reinforces the social content by poetically illuminating the message it seeks to express. In contrast, *Dogville's* narration often jars with the action on screen, underplaying the horror of the events portrayed and giving a homely story-time feel, which only serves to reinforce the injustice. The film is full of jump-cuts and is set on a stage, where chalk lines stand in for real rooms and props are kept to a minimum. Whilst we soon forget the stage and let the dialogue shape the world that these characters inhabit, the set simultaneously creates enough distance to allow for critical reflection. Similar jarring moments are created in *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange*, where classical music or camp popular songs are ironically juxtaposed to

Still from *Dogville*

horrific and terrifying images. In *Weekend* captions flash up upon the screen and characters directly address the audience with long political monologues and in *Palindromes* the central character is played by multiple actresses. The point of these aesthetic methods is not simply novelty, but rather to redirect the audience's attention from emotional and psychological engagement to critical social reflection.

Critical reflections are created when, for example, in *Palindromes*, pro-abortionist liberals are presented as mirror images of anti-abortionist fundamentalists, or in *Dogville* where supposedly "average, normal people" are judged and condemned for their evil. In such films, juxtaposition, metaphor and exaggeration are used to force us to see the world in a new way. It is here they come close to what Axel Honneth calls "disclosing critique".

A Disclosing critique of society that attempts to change our beliefs by evoking new ways of seeing cannot simply use the vocabulary of argumentative justification; rather, it can achieve its effect only if it employs linguistic recourses that, by condensing or shifting meanings, show up facts hitherto unperceived in social reality.[5]

A disclosing critique employs literary methods, to create a new way of perceiving reality. It is the coincidence of literary and aesthetic methods and realist social criticism that disclosing critiques gain their distinct character. Whilst appealing to artistic methods, it is reality, not fiction,

that they are concerned with. It is for this reason that Honneth associates them with theory, not art.

It is in terms of this circumstance that we can explain the difference between a disclosing critique of society and a work of art: whereas the opening of new contexts of meaning can transpire without bounds, as it were, in aesthetic reproduction, in social criticism it remains bound to the limits set by the actual constraints of social reproduction.[6]

For Honneth, disclosing critique uses an aesthetic mechanism in order to create new ways of perceiving social reality, but must be distinguished from art in that it is not a well of boundless creativity. Disclosing critique uses artistic tools to present reality, whereas art has no duty to present "reality". Whilst there is truth in this claim, the task of (re)presenting social reality is not one that is foreign to Artists and Filmmakers. Directors such as Brecht or Von Trier seem far more preoccupied with revealing social reality than they do with boundless expression. It is in this context that they shift towards re-revealing social reality and engendering its social critique.

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For Cinema and the vocation of Filmmaking, the future of hope resides in both its process and its critiques. Social Critique becomes redundant if it is not also translated into social change. Whilst social critique can provoke social change it can also become neutered and repetitively assimilated back into the system. Subverting the system requires engagement with the process, but subverting the process alone risks becoming yet another empty "avant-garde" façade. Only when the two interweave with each other can their truly subversive potential manifest. Film as a social critique must be accompanied by an awareness of the process which maintains it and sometimes undermines it and an engagement with the process should not be treated as subversive in its own right unless also supplemented by critique. Only then can a cinema of despair become a cinema of hope.

I do not intend to provide here a recipe for a "Brave New World" –nor is it likely that cinema alone could provide one. Cinema will always risk becoming a silent cry into a crowded auditorium, a complicity in the very system it wishes to overthrow. If the hope of a new Humanity, a new Enlightenment and a new becoming is to be found within it, this will require diligence, scrutiny, struggle and even error. Only time will tell if it will remain a helpless gasp in an age of suffocation or a blossoming of hope for the future.

This Article was written as part 3 of a series of articles for One+One entitled Cinema and The Enlightenment to Come"

1 See Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man. Free Press. 1992.*

2 United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2007/2008. Fighting Climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007.

3 Kevin Bales, Zoe Trodd, Alex Kent Williamson *Modern Slavery: The Secret World of 27 Million People*. Oneworld, 2009.

4 Angela Curran, 'Bertolt Brecht', in Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga, ed, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film, Oxen*, p. 324

5 Axel Honneth, 'The possibility of a disclosing critique of society: *The Dialectic of Englightenment in the light of current debates in social criticism', Constellations* 7/1, 2000, p.123

6 ibid

Peter Whitehead and Terrorism

James Riley

Still from *Terrorism Considered as One of the Fine Arts*

In April 2007, novelist and filmmaker Peter Whitehead was invited to the ICA to talk about some of the pop promo films he'd made in the sixties. His frenetically edited clips of Eric Burdon and World War II dive-bombers played on a kaleidoscopic programme alongside work by Gerard Malanga and Nam June Paik. Interviewed on stage after the screening, Whitehead patiently fielded the usual questions about his work with the Stones and Hendrix in a further display of the seemingly endless public appetite for nostalgic sixties anecdote. Towards the end of the session however, he was asked about his thoughts on contemporary film. As a director primarily associated with the sixties, perhaps the pivotal decade of the 20th century, who in his opinion did he feel was making interesting work in the 21st? Whitehead paused momentarily before announcing that the greatest film of the 21st century had in fact already been made. It had been made in New York on September 11, 2001 and it had been made by Osama Bin Laden. Heads shook and there were no more questions.

In making this comment, Whitehead was recapitulating an argument he had made a year earlier in 'In the Beginning was the Image, Before the Beginning was the Avant-Garde'. This was an essay on the current status of avant-garde art written as the introduction for *La Cinéma Critique* (2010), a book on experimental film published by the Sorbonne. In it he stated that in the current cultural context, the terrorist has rendered the artist redundant having 'learnt the tricks

and gambits of Art's Artifice'. Working from the basis that 'the true purpose of the avant-garde' is to 'nurture (if not enact) acts of war […] a calculated violation of frigid sterile form , Whitehead presents Bin Laden's 'cleverly contrived film of 'Several Missile Planes" as a supreme example. The events of 9/11 and the widely disseminated matrix of footage are seen to be monumentally effective in creating a work that is 'directly and belligerently dangerous'. Whitehead goes onto suggest that Bin Laden's 'legacy- his 'film" should be called *Terrorism Considered as One of the Fine Arts'*, a phrase that would have significant resonance for his own subsequent work.[1] He took it as the title for his 2007 novel which he then adapted into a full length film that recently premiered at the Viennale.

Peter Whitehead in 1967

Terrorism as art. What are we to make of this? The icy response of the ICA audience indicates that the connection obviously doesn't work as a joke. Is this uncomfortable juxtaposition intended as provocation or an expression of misanthropic delight? Whitehead is certainly no stranger to the former. As a filmmaker he's best known for a series of documentaries, the most incendiary of which are *Benefit of the Doubt* (1967) an account of the Royal Shakespeare Company performing *US*, and *The Fall* (1969), an examination of the decline of the American protest movement. *Benefit* contains a sequence in which Glenda Jackson delivers a monologue begging for the horrors of the Vietnam War to be brought into polite English gardens. Similarly, *The Fall* presents the viewer with riots, police beatings and equally brutal performance art to suggest that violence is the inevitable outcome of initially peaceful protest.

Much of the critique in these films was directed towards the paralysis Whitehead saw as characterising mainstream responses to Vietnam; the public inability or unwillingness to adequately make sense of a seemingly distant conflict. His comments on Terrorism could be taken in the same spirit, a cultural wake-up call designed to trouble Western complacency. The problem with this comparison is that 9/11 essentially fulfils the mid-sixties wish of Peter Brook and the Royal Shakespeare Company; one of the entanglements of American foreign policy is devastatingly realised in the domestic sphere. As such, a crucial difference emerges. The performance documented in *Benefit* shows the use of an art form – dramatic theatre – to galvanize political commitment. The elevation of the Twin Tower attacks to the level of art could be seen to offer the reverse of

this stance. The act of aesthetising a physically traumatic event potentially erases its material implications and political hardwiring. This is difficult in the case of 9/11 as whilst the attack carried clear symbolic resonance as regards the conflict between two ideologies, the spectacular magnitude of the occurrence made it difficult to deny the ground-level consequences, most prominently the human cost. As musician Mark Manning observed in *Collateral Damage* (2002), when he first saw images of the burning towers, his initial experience of 'an unholy, gleeful sense of karmic *Schadenfreude* was quickly sobered by the 'reality' underpinning this shift of the 'cosmic equilibrium': 'the firemen, the secretaries, the innocent families .[2]

Having highlighted these problematic factors however, it is important to reiterate Whitehead s concern with the concept of the 'avant-garde'. In his argument, this familiar term of artistic creativity and experimentation (which carries its own semantic echoes of attrition and warfare), signifies a mode of creative action that is at odds with the control mechanisms of late capitalism. He notes that currently, nothing can be called 'art, avant-garde or otherwise, unless it appears on a seductive Technicolor screen or processed by seductive video machines .[3] Here Whitehead is outlining the cycle of recuperation that the Situationists observed in the operation of the spectacle: the dominance of commerce and the associated ability of the mass media to neutralise oppositional forms of expression by incorporating and imitating their imagery and technique. In response, a form of outflanking is advocated that involves the creation of 'authentic art equal to the challenge, as powerful in its methodology as the brain-washing techniques exploited by the Media'. This, for Whitehead, constitutes Terrorism, a process of subterfuge that works to 'expose the rules of the game being exploited by the beholders of the Institutionalised Barbaric'.[4]

2 *Terrorism Considered as One of the Fine Arts* directly enacts this strategy. The film draws upon the plot of the novel and the other two texts that make up Whitehead's 'Nohzone Trilogy': *Nature s Child* and *Girl on the Train*. MI6 agent Michael Schlieman is 'assigned to Paris to infiltrate a cell of Eco-Terrorists planning a high level political assassination .[5] The group's leader, Maria Lenoir, is said to have been responsible for the death of two French agents and the only clues to her whereabouts lie in a series of seemingly cryptic e-mails. Realising that the messages all refer to literature, film and philosophy, Schlieman is able to decode the allusions and determine that the group is active in Vienna. He relocates his operation to the city and begins to drift around the two circles of the *Ringstrasse* tram, haunting Maria and the other members of the cell.

On the basis of this synopsis, it would seem that Whitehead is working within the conventions of the detective and / or espionage thriller. The film certainly draws upon the language of these genres as it is structured around a narrative of investigation; makes use of a central voice over; contains numerous femme fatales and takes place within a foreboding urban environment. However, having established these signposts, Whitehead quickly moves away from their expected usage. The film as a whole is radically non-linear. Rather than depicting the terrorist actions that the voice-over alludes to, the film's

imagery and on-screen quotations are arranged on the basis of their dissonant potential. Whitehead s aim is not to move from uncertainty to certainty – as would be expected of the investigative narrative – but to produce meaning across the film's 3 chapters as a consequence of the interference that occurs between his unexpected combinations of visual, audio and textual information.

Still from *Terrorism Considered as One of the Fine Arts*

This structure carries significance for Whitehead's project at the level of both form and content. It can initially be seen as instrumental in communicating to the viewer the particularity of Schlieman's subject position. Much of the film is conveyed from his point of view, a perspective which the references to Thomas De-Quincey suggest is characterised by an opium intensity. Specifically, the intention is for the character to mirror the figure of Tiriesias as he appears in T.S. Eliot's The *Waste Land* (1922). Tierisias is the perpetual spectator, detached from the events he observes but his presence is also that which unites and motivates the poem. Similarly, the substance of the film is what Schlieman sees, and as in Eliot's text, all the women he is in dialogue with are essentially one woman: they are different facets of the eternally absent Maria that Schlieman projects onto those around him.[6] The multiple associative links that the film establishes act as a record of this hallucinatory psychogeographical movement. As Schlieman s idiosyncratic camera I/eye traverses the multiple circles of Vienna - the city of dreams, the Freudian unconscious and *The Third Man* – it creates unexpected synaptic connections across different artistic, philosophical and historical zones.

On a wider formal level, the application of this framework enables Whitehead to make reference to the operation of film as a medium insofar as it draws attention to the operation of montage, cinema s hidden hand. The tension that Whitehead establishes between the film's diegetic levels is instrumental in highlighting the extent to which cinematic verisimilitude depends upon their largely unnoticed synchronicity. It is as if he uses the film to explode a recognisable genre as a means to expose the devices that maintain a normative view of 'reality'.

“ Whitehead sees it is necessary for art to assume the efficacy of the street, to be as explosive as a car bomb ”

Jean Paulhan described a similar proc-

ess of expression and critique in his book *The Flowers of Tarbes* (1941). Writing on the subject of 'Terror' in literature, Paulhan argued that it represented a tendency in literature opposed to 'Rhetoric'. Describing Rhetoric as a rule-bound imperative that affords language communicative stability, Paulhan offers Terror as an engagement with ambiguity, a 'continual aspiration towards originality .[7] From this perspective, the literary terrorist works within language with the aim of creative reinvention rather than working at the utilitarian level of 'verbalism'. For Paulhan, one way of perpetrating this terror is by signposting Rhetoric, self-consciously highlighting cliché and generic conventions as they appear in language.[8] What we see with Whitehead is a comparable foregrounding action. In contrast to *Benefit*, with Terrorism Whitehead is not merely articulating what has previously gone unacknowledged but is pointing to some of the structures of repression that have conditioned the limits of what can be said.

At this point Whitehead's formal experimentation can be connected to a wider cultural critique. The film repeatedly links its fictional terrorists to a real life event -the sinking of the Greenpeace ship 'Rainbow Warrior' in New Zealand 1985. The ship was attempting to disrupt nuclear testing in the area and was sunk by members of the French Secret Service, an act that resulted in the death of the Greenpeace photographer Fernando Pereira. For Whitehead this sabotage constitutes an act of State terrorism, institutionalised barbarism. It is indicative of the way in which violence and oppositional tactics are used on both sides of the imaginary moral divide between the establishment and the attacker. He notes that this type of correspondence is generally obscured by the State's cultivation of the fear of Terrorism 'as a means of extending their manipulative repressive powers over and through the Media and the Multinational companies. [9]

In light of this situation, what the film outlines is a strategy of exposure that offers a creative means of engaging with such a power structure. When faced with the repressive mechanism and blank surface of the contemporary mediascape, Whitehead sees it is necessary for art to assume the efficacy of the street, to be as explosive as a car bomb; as disturbing to the status quo as a cobblestone torn up and hurled at the police. If Terrorism is to be seen as an action that shocks, damages and affronts, then Whitehead s pairing of it with art does not suggest an attempt at neutralisation. Instead he is encouraging the development within creative expression of an analogous capacity to disturb the 'collective inertia'.[10]

Peter Whitehead
www.peterwhitehead.net
Nohzone
www.nohzone.com

1. Peter Whitehead, 'In the Beginning was the Image, Before the Beginning was the Avant-Garde', in *La Cinéma Critique* ed. by Nicole Brenez and Bidhan Jacobs (Paris: Sorbonne, 2010), pp. 26-30 (p.28).

2. Mark Manning, *Collateral Damage* (London: Creation, 2002), p.6-7.

3. Whitehead, p.28.

4. Ibid.

5. Whitehead, 'Synopsis: *Terrorism Considered as One of the Fine Arts'* (unpublished synopsis, Peter Whitehead Archive, 2009), p.1.

6. Tierisias described in T.S. Eliot, 'Note 218', in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

7.Jean Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes or Terror in Literature* [1941], trans. by Michael Syrotinski (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p.
8,9. Ibid.

10. Whitehead, 'Synopsis', p.1.x Whitehead, 'In the Beginning was the Image', p.29.

Testing the Water

Interview with Ron Peck

James Marcus Tucker

Fighters **- Mark Tibbs (Left), Jimmy Flint (Right) , Ron Peck (centre)**

Interviewing Ron Peck in his East End studio felt like I had met a fellow traveller. His first feature film *Nighthawks* – a film shot in 1977 and dealing with the then taboo subject of homosexuality and the double life lead by its protagonist, a teacher named Jim - made a big impact on me as a teenager, around the time I was coming to terms with my sexuality and also my own desire to be a filmmaker. Watching his new film *Cross-Channel* before I went to visit him made me smile – set on a cross-channel ferry, and shot on a small DV Camcorder, it reminded me of those teenage years when I was, by my own admission, a

geeky shipping enthusiast. I would drag my parents onto any passenger vessel I could, camcorder in hand, to wander through the lounges and corridors. There was, as Ron says in the interview, something very "special" about these ships – something magical about the world they contained, and majestic about the ships themselves.

Ron's films exist in the gap between fiction and documentary. Mixing playful yet dramatic aesthetic styles in his documentaries, and using non-professional actors and improvisation in his dramas, he embodies Grierson s belief that documentary is indeed, the creative treatment of actuality.

Q What drew you into filmmaking at the beginning?

There was an element of escape initially. I was spellbound by the whole make-believe aspect of it. Like any kid I was really pulled into other worlds, and really I remember being besotted with epic movies such as *Ben-Hur* because they were so far away from anything close by. At the time I wasn t really responsive to British realist movies about life here. That all changed through a local film society – they were showing films from Greece, Japan and Italy, and that was really eye opening. I was reading magazines like Movie, and then I bought a Super-8 camera and from then on, I knew I would try to make films. I wrote a lot of letters as a teenager to filmmakers such as Nicholas Ray and to my amazement, a lot of those people replied! I find it incredible that I was able, as a 16 year old schoolboy, to meet Nicholas Ray. I don't know if that kind of thing would happen now.

Q How did *Nighthawks* come to be?

The London Film School brought me to London. The school was an excellent experience as it was so hands on and there were a lot of people from the documentary movement and from the Left, like Wolf Wila. We met Cassavetes and were taught by Mike Leigh. But I was at a crisis point in my life. I had accidently walked into a gay pub with some old University friends at a reunion, and after we all realised and left, I went back myself the following night. So it was a period of self discovery. You could say that the making of my London Film School film *It's Ugly Head* was an element of coming out, at least to the people I was there with. I can see in it a rough sketch of *Nighthawks*. I formed a workshop group called Four Corners with three other people from the school that is still going today with different people.

What was emerging from Four Corners then was this idea to examine the world around us. There became a strong feeling in me that as a gay man this life should be expressed and my own story was not unique. Imagery of gay people from TV and film were so exotic and histrionic yet the people I was meeting in the bars were so ordinary. There was a great desire for me to do something – maybe I could be a catalyst for something. We developed about 8 drafts for the film – it was all written but it wasn't direct speech – it was more a rough grid than something that should be stuck to.

Q The scene that really sticks out to me in *Nighthawks* is where the teacher is asked by his class if he is gay and he is honest, which starts a debate. The children s responses are so authentic. How did you approach this scene?

All the kids in that scene

were pieced together from brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces from people connected to the film. The scene was also bolstered with a few actors from the Anna Scher Theatre School. I remember we talked to the kids in the lunch hour before we shot the scene and planted some questions that came from the real life account of John Warburton, a teacher who was fired for being honest to his class about his sexuality. Actually, the kids were pretty enlightened and they were acting hostility – it wasn't genuine. Like the rest of the film, it was done in long takes so the kids could really get into it. The film, and particularly that scene was followed up with tabloid headlines about kids starring in a gay film, and asking if it was pornographic and all that nonsense.

Q Is it an authentic portrayal of 1970 s gay life?
It is, but also a limited reality. I felt the people we could persuade to be in the film were not necessarily people who would go to gay clubs. Those people were afraid of being spotted. I remember a whole section of the script was about a society of people I had discovered of gay hotel workers from the Canary Islands, but they said they couldn't even consider being in the film. So it is quite a narrow view. The film is about looking. That was the connection with the film camera, and we tried to find a relationship between looking, tracking, zooming. That s where some of the tension is in the film.

Q *Strip Jack Naked* is your 1991 documentary looking back at your life and the making of *Nighthawks*. Why did you feel the need to do this?
Nighthawks had found a certain acceptance and it was a shame so much material from it had never seen the light of day. The film was even being shown in schools and colleges and I thought maybe I could put some material together to put a context to the film. But then it just grew. We didn't shoot much, mostly it was outtakes, scraps of Super-8, bits of *It's Ugly Head*. I think I just enjoyed working with the form and being free of any particular narrative. I felt that to explain *Nighthawks* I had to make something bigger than *Nighthawks*. I wanted to go beyond it, and see where we are now. Also how can you stop the film ending up in a completely depressing place because of AIDS. Before making *Nighthawks* I recorded Super-8 of a gay march which had about 300 people. So for *Strip Jack Naked* I went out with a video camera and filmed 100,000 at a gay pride parade and it was much more of a carnival. There were all these young faces which were so unmarked by trouble and repression. It was interesting to juxtapose these faces with those of Dirk Bogarde in *Victim* and the actor in *Nighthawks*. So it was to go beyond AIDS, it meant AIDS was not the whole story.

Q Your film *Fighters* is a documentary on the hyper-masculinised world of East End Boxing. What drew you to this world?
I had made a film before this called *Empire State* which was a first attempt to deal with the area of London I was living in. It seemed then to be 95% white working class. I was trying to dramatise the change in East London within the Thatcher period of aggression and competition. One of the characters in the script was a boxer and I went to see a play about boxing where they used real boxers. One of those boxers, Jimmy

Flint, lit the place up so I left him my number and he was very responsive. Due to the budget of £2,000,000, I had to get some names into the film and couldn't really do much improvisation. It was such a fight, I didn't really enjoy making it. *Fighters* was then a way to do something more personal. Through Jimmy I met the boxing fraternity. It was another world that was hidden and new to me. I was fascinated by the loyalties in this world. Plus the image of the fighter meant something to me. As a gay person trying to make *Nighthawks* I had to fight and stand up for myself, so boxing had a strong iconic image that no other sport had.

Q *Fighters* has such a wonderful mix of aesthetics black & white, colour, slow-motion, long takes, handheld camera and composed compositions, short narrative sections and personal narration from yourself. Was this a conscious decision going into the production?

I shot a lot of research material at the gym, and a lot of that material ended up in the film. I didn't think it would do originally. I was editing *Strip Jack Naked* at the same time that I was doing the preliminary shooting on *Fighters* and it loosened me up. I thought we could do all kinds of things. It was a kind of collage. I realised I didn't have to subscribe to any rules. That was partly a reaction to the feeling that *Empire State* locked me down. I went very instinctive with it, which became a very direct relationship that I didn t want to lose. *Fighters* originally didn t have my voiceover, and I had no plan to narrate it. But some of the boxers said at the fine cut screening that the one thing that was missing from the film was me. So the voice came in afterwards and it really helped me to organise the disparate material.

Q There s a real sense of place in all of your films. The club in *Nighthawks*, the gym and East London in *Fighters*, the ferry in your new film *Cross-Channel*. The location is a character in its own right.

I have often thought of certain locations as arenas. The nightclub is an arena. The gym world is an arena. It is a question of looking long and hard at things. I am drawn to filmmakers who hold on a sense of place. I'm thinking of Chantal Akerman, Sokurov, Angelopoulos, Tarkovsky. They just let it seep in.

Q You used real boxers, and not actors to play the roles in your next film *Real Money*, a drama about boxing and its links to organised crime. How did you get such unselfconscious and natural performances from them?

Trust. That is the basis from which I always try to work. We had a cast and crew screening of *Fighters* at the ICA and they were so pleased with the film. *Real Money* became possible because of their trust. As for performances, it's easier with non-professionals. They are more open, and have no bag of tricks to fall back on. We just built characters that were close to who they were without it being exactly who they were. We began work on a third project entitled *Gangsters* to be shot on 35mm with many of the same actors. However, funders would not accept improvisation or non-professional actors which meant it was dead in the water as the whole script had been informed by them. Going from meeting to meeting, being told you don't have a chance, no matter how

much they like the script was very depressing.

Q Your new film *Cross-Channel* continues your successful blend of narrative and documentary. There are two stories going on at once. That of the unseen narrator, and that of two brothers travelling to France, both occurring aboard the ferry.

There were a few starting points. I wanted to make a film about the ferries with a French friend of mine. I felt there was really something special about them. I sent Brittany Ferries *Fighters*, which they loved and gave me the permission to shoot whatever I wanted. Away from this, I started to work on a script idea with Mark Tibbs who was in *Fighters*. We started workshopping on a story about two brothers, one of whom may be a small-time gangster. After doing some video tests on the ships, I thought I could take the story of the brothers and put it on the ferry. The ambiguity is important as the two brothers may be wholly, or partially, figments of the narrator s imagination; or they may be operating in a parallel narrative of their own.

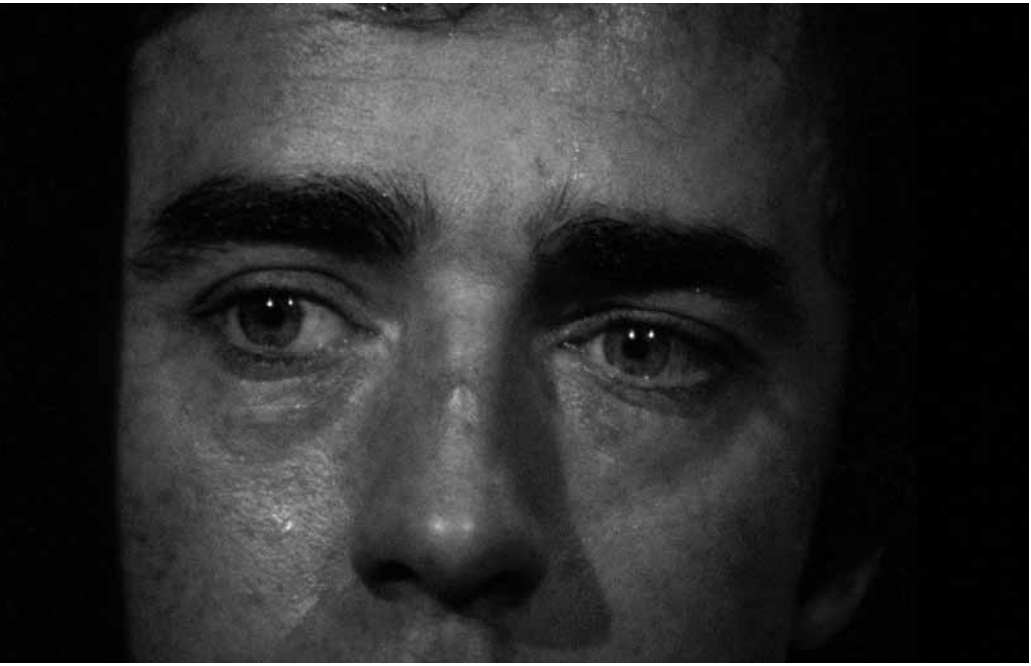
I knew there would be a lot of long takes, partly because of pacing. The ferry imposes a certain pace – it is an imposition, but also an opportunity. There are other elements such as the engine room, the bridge and the long take of Portsmouth's skyline that are not connected to the story, and with the voiceover I felt that it would add a complexity.

Still from *Real Money* courtesy Second Run DVD

I had very little money, and wondered if there was a way to make something fairly complex with simple technology. Contrary to the normal way one is supposed to start a film, what I started with was completely open. There was lots of footage, like interviews, that didn t make it into the film. In fact, I had to do a transcript for French subtitles, and so the script only exists now. Instead of having a script that everyone has to approve, I started with complete freedom because of the minimal money I had, and I've ended up with something I feel works as a structure; it wasn't planned, it was arrived at.

Q What issues do you encounter when trying to raise funds for your films?

The problem is that you have to clear so many things with so many people. It's not just a question of holding your nerve, it's having endless battles. One of the problems I've found is that some of the producers or financers I have been to, our frame of reference is so far apart. There s so little interest in international cinema, of cinema of the past...if you were to mention the name Antonioni or



Still from *Nighthawks*, courtesy BFI

Cassavetes, that would actually go against you. Our filmmaking is so based on literary criteria. In a discussion with the Film Council on a project I brought to them about Russia, they told me that as it was a sort of road film, I can just set it in Spain. There s a lot of talk there about diversity but no real recognition of the diversity of cinema and of different ways of making cinema.

I can understand why such big sums of money need to be controlled. But I think that in other countries they have achieved a much greater range of cinema. I haven't seen anything recently in British Cinema that even compares to some of the best stuff from Iran over the last ten years. Where does that come from? That humility. That patient documenting of life that is not in any way melodramatic. It's a different attitude to cinema, to culture, to the world, to life.

Q What s next for you?

I am trying to produce some larger-scale work that requires engaging with the industry but at the same time making smaller-scale more personal work in a freer and more exploratory way. I do think that if *Cross-Channel* works well enough, it could prove a way forward for films to be made – in a way anyone can do. It's just the time you put in, what you bring together. With distribution, I don't know enough about the internet so I am talking to young people for whom it's second nature. That way you are making things more freely. So I am working on two parallel fronts and *Cross-Channel* is a testing of the water.

Laurel and Hard Lessons

Some thoughts on the films of Laurel and Hardy

Samuel Kershaw

The month of September later this year will mark the hundredth anniversary of the westward Atlantic crossing made in a cattle boat by a hungry and largely unknown English vaudeville performer in order to seek his fortune in America. That performer's name was Arthur Stanley Jefferson, shortly to become Stan Laurel. Among his companions was the young Charles Spencer Chaplin, who went on to achieve global stardom soon after his arrival in America. Stanley had a rather longer road ahead of him, playing in music halls and taking bit-parts in films for many years, gradually developing and honing his style, all the while carefully noting what worked and what did not work. When at last his moment of opportunity came, Stan had prepared himself sufficiently to make the very most of it.

His years of hardship and relative lack of recognition, during which time he had very nearly given up film altogether, had hardened him into a splendid comic technician. Indeed, his overwhelming eventual success sometimes came to work against him, for his film shoots sometimes had to be abandoned during his best years. The gradual build-up of hilarity on his film sets as various parts were worked out and improvised frequently left the performers, producers and stage-managers unable to work for laughing so much, occasionally forcing work to be suspended altogether. Similar events were reported amongst his audiences in the world's movie theatres, members of which often were escorted away – or even carried out – in hysterical fits.

Almost a century on, I myself have sometimes observed and experienced when watching Laurel and Hardy movies the same kind of crippling laughter reported of the early showings.

On at least one occasion of watching one of Stan's films I began to wonder if I would ever stop laughing, and became fearful that I should choke myself. It was a delightfully unpleasant experience, and taught me a valuable lesson: that it is a lie that comedy ages badly; that old comics have nothing to teach us. The truth is that only *bad* comedy ages badly – great comedy has no age. But I wonder what it is in particular that makes Laurel and Hardy so ageless. How can they remain relevant today when so many of their counterparts are today remembered only by film historians? Surely, at a remove of four generations, they can have nothing to teach us today?

"On at least one occasion of watching one of Stan's films I began to wonder if I would ever stop laughing"

•

A great music conductor once gave the counter-intuitive but excellent advice that if one feels one is boring an audience, *slow down*. This is exactly what Laurel and Hardy did to the comic film. Camera trickery, fast cutting and flashy stunts were the stock-in-trade of early comedy films, with many anonymous characters frantically chasing each other up the sides of buildings and receiving endless fruit pies in their faces. Stan Laurel's achievement was to slow the action and the violence down to a crawling pace. Instead of leaving the camera at a distance, observing the characters as a group with only occasional close-ups, Stan's cameras are almost always tight in on the cast, with long periods of silence in which a single character simply gazes out at the audience. When recorded speech appeared in the movies in the late 1920s, many film-makers fell to the temptation to have all the characters jabbering away incessantly for the sake of the novelty of it. Not so for Laurel and Hardy. Speech was almost always kept to a minimum, in order to keep the emphasis on film's unique virtue of pictures in motion.

It is true that arresting effects, stylish flicks-of-the-wrist and technological developments are fun and are almost always useful in one way or another, but film-makers, as for all artists, who concentrate on such things are playing a dangerous game which not everyone is sufficiently equipped to win. An audience builds tolerance to films predicated on titillation. They may enjoy it at first, but sooner or later one finds that more is required to achieve the same effect. In one's intellectual and emotional infancy one tends to prefer hyper-emotionalism, faster cars, showier postures, bigger explosions and massive vehemences of every other kind.

> **"If one were sound-hearted, one would take every print of every Laurel and Hardy movie and burn the lot in the town square"**

But one eventually becomes desensitised and bored. The same is not true of human action and reaction. Indeed, the more one sees recognisable human activity, the more one appreciates it and the less, indeed, one requires for equal or greater fascination to take hold. There is more interest in a single one of what Stan called Oliver's 'fancy-dan gestures' than in all of many examples of films which plan from the beginning to *amaze* their audiences with greater effect than ever before.

Laurel and Hardy are ordinary. Unlike many comics, neither were tortured souls. Both always insisted that they were uninteresting people. When not working, Ollie spent his life golfing, cooking and feeding his chickens. Stan had little life beyond work. On the few days when he was not wrestling with editing equipment or working out plotlines and situations, he went fishing. Part of their secret is simply that their quite complete lack of pretentiousness surfaces in all their films. This is why their best work has weathered better than those of many other film-makers of the time. That is not to say that they were superior artists, for they were not. But their intended effect on today s viewer is far less diluted than that of many of Chaplin's and Keaton's movies. They are not distant geniuses whose immense powers of invention and mimicry leave audiences simply stunned. Indeed, Laurel and Hardy do

not even enclose themselves properly inside their films as icons to be worshipped. Often their movies have no real beginning or end, as if Stan and Ollie were actually living these mad black and white lives somewhere in California and simply occasionally happen to pass in front of a camera – as if one could conceivably go and see it all happening with one s own eyes. More importantly, the two of them give the impression of seeing *you* with their own eyes, by incessantly looking directly down into the camera.

The composer Mozart once replied to a question about what was the secret of good music with the response, *How should I know?* Stan Laurel, as many of the greatest comedians and clowns have done, used to give much the same answer to questions about where the roots of comedy lay. But perhaps his particular secret is that he and Ollie are not a double act but a triple act, with the audience member as the 'third man'. They do not distance themselves by pretending that the camera is not there. Everything is done for the sake of the audience; they never forget us, nor do they allow us to forget that they know we are watching. Many other film and television comics appeal directly to us but these addresses tend to be incidental, while such things stand at the centre of Laurel and Hardy's purpose. As a result, we feel as if we are there in person as mute partners, as Ollie constantly glances over his shoulder to us for confirmation that the world is indeed a parade of ridiculousness and as Stan looks to us in supplication for pity. But one's corner in this triangle is an uncomfortable one. For one does nothing but stare and laugh as Stan and Ollie feel their way blindly through terrifying nether worlds of pain, slipping between this universe and a parallel one in which they continually fail to learn that everything is itching to burst into flames or poke their eyes out or crack their skulls in half.

Contrary to popular belief, Ollie says *Here's another fine mess you've gotten me into!* rather infrequently. Many other phrases crop up with equal or more frequent regularity, one of the most plaintively poignant being *Why don't you do something to help me?* The question applies not only to Stan but also to us. If one had any decency, one would not watch at all. If one were sound-hearted, one would take every print of every Laurel and Hardy movie and burn the lot in the town square, in order that Stan and Ollie should not have to live and re-live these lives of permanent horror. As long as one keeps watching, one condemns these blameless child-men to the rack of futility. Yet one loves them too much not to spend time with them. One has the sad dilemma either of annihilating them by turning away

or of allowing them to suffer into eternity.

In other words, one becomes locked into the same type of muddly relationship with Stan and Ollie as they have with each other. For as much as one likes to lie to oneself, one does not choose one s friends. Friendship has a life of its own: it is a unique type of parasite which requires not one host to survive but two. Does that sound bitter or unpleasant? On the contrary: the body contains many parasites which are absolutely essential for its survival. But it is as well to be honest with oneself. And also to recognise that this will never change, which is why Laurel and Hardy cannot age. Theirs is a vision of people pushed together by forces above them; people who cannot suffer each other yet need each other desperately, just as we experience them, and each other. Although they and we are free to walk, none may escape.

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But if Laurel and Hardy still mean something to us, is it the case that they are condemned merely to be a pair of zoo creatures, gawped at and enjoyed but not thought to be models for life? If they still speak to us, perhaps it is only because their voices are powerful enough to reach us across the wasteland of the twentieth century. Things have changed: that is plain. Early film was a time of artistic heroism, greater even than its reputation. Laurel and Hardy, and others like them, lived in the happy gap which appears in all arts and cultures between the chaotic and barbaric birth of a new method and its later institutionalisation and fossilisation. I shall not be one to criticise: one might just as well scold a tree for not growing more quickly or for shedding its leaves in the winter. I shall instead choose to be one to praise that brief moment when one first notices, usually already too late, that the tree is in full leaf in the sun.

Laurel and Hardy speak to us of the *heroic*. I do not mean that in the corrupted sense of 'heroic' which simply means 'good' or 'nice', but in the sense that they lived in a period of all possibility of which full use was made – good and bad. America was still young; the Old West was very much in living memory; states were still joining the Union. As for the motion-picture industry, there were no unions. Most in the business worked like dogs night and day for little money. There are endless stories of broken limbs, crushed hands, terrible falls. James Finlayson knocked himself out cold during the filming of Big Business. Buster Keaton broke his neck during the shooting of *Sherlock Jr.* – but carried on regardless. And all spoke in later years of these early decades of film as being the happiest of their lives. Stan pitied later generations.

But Stan and his contemporaries were not heroic in the sense of being rule-breakers: there were few rules to break. The spirit of improvisation, though now almost completely lost to mainstream Hollywood, was strong in those days. As far as Stan's films went, someone in the studio – perhaps Stan himself, perhaps one of the gag-writers, sometimes even Hal Roach

“ Think of Laurel and Hardy's films as rather like a form of visible jazz – open-ended improvisations by master craftsmen on certain themes and characteristic signatures. ”

himself – would come up with a little comical idea. It would then be expanded upon by others around him, with H. M. Walker adding some dialogue. Stan and his crew would read through the resulting script and then, as often as not, throw it in the bin, instead improvising around the general ideas and the better lines, largely making things up as they went along. One might be tempted, given the time in which they were working, to think of Laurel and Hardy's films as rather like a form of visible jazz – open-ended improvisations by master craftsmen on certain themes and characteristic signatures.

In the very year that Stan made his trip to America, the great Sergei Diaghilev was sending earthquakes through Europe with his Question, which ought to pass the lips of every artist when they wake each morning, *Why should I rest now when I have all eternity in which to rest?* The late twentieth century and the early twenty-first have encouraged us to forget that there are no excuses to be made; no special rules. That one is tired and penniless and doubting ought to hold one back no more than one ought to regard one's own natural gifts as a guarantee that all one will ever do will be worthwhile. By refusing to rest before that final rest of rests, Stan and Ollie made more than a hundred movies together. Some were brilliant, some were terrible – the important thing is simply that they *worked like hell*. In 1929 alone, they made fourteen short films. Indeed, so absorbed were they in their work that they barely realised that they had meantime become worldwide celebrities. When they visited England at the end of their 'golden period' of 1929-1932, they were dumbfounded at the crowds of thousands who met them as they stepped off the ship at Southampton.

When the young Stan had crossed the Atlantic in the opposite direction more than twenty years previously he had many more years of hunger, obscurity and apprenticeship before him than had his travelling companion Chaplin. But when Stan spied his opportunity in the form of a small-time character actor named Oliver Hardy and in the hands-off artistic policy of the Hal Roach Studios, he grabbed it and held on tenaciously until he had done what he had come to do. And this is truly what every artist may learn from Stan – a lesson which, again, can never age – that although one often spends years preparing and worrying, one must at last *simply work* and say to oneself, *I shall do as I must, regardless*.

Out of the Cinema to the End of the World

Jeff Keen

Daniel Fawcett

I met experimental filmmaker Jeff Keen this week, he is now 86 and sadly ill with cancer. I went to his house and met him and his wife Jackie. We talked for several hours about art, Brighton, their life together and of course his films. Jeff came to filmmaking when he was in his late thirties, he explains, "I was working in the parks and gardens, for ten years, it was pretty rough (...) it was good for me to do that, but then we had a terrible winter in the sixties and everything froze up and I got fed up with it, Jackie was a student at the art college at the time and I got in with them and they wanted to make films but they didn't have time, so I

took on responsibility of making films to show at the film society." So with some old unused black and white film stock that he found he shot some footage that would become his first short, Jeff began to make films regularly and show them at the film society. Over the next couple of years he gained some recognition which resulted in his films being shown in the foyer of the National Film Theatre.

His films seem to have two strands, one is a kind of home-movie documentation of places, people and events from his life, often edited in split-screen with two or four reels playing alongside each other with a nostalgic Rock and Roll soundtrack. Of one of the 60 s films he says, "that's how I make them (...) over two days of improvising on a rubbish tip. Anyone can do it and it will be different each time, get a gang of people making films like that and they will appear different each time and that s one of the really fascinating things about it". The other is an extension of his drawings and collages.

"Anyone can do it and it will be different each time, get a gang of people making films like that and they will appear different each time and that s one of the really fascinating things about it"

In these films with titles such as Irresistible Attack, Instant Cinema, Flik Flak, and Omozap, images are energetically created and destroyed constantly and feel like they could and should go on forever. There s never

a resolution, just a point when they end. With these films he is more than a filmmaker; he is a painter or illustrator who uses film to bring his images to life.

In the late sixties and seventies Jeff gained some support and recognition from people and groups involved in underground film, his work was shown at the London Filmmakers Cooperative and in 'the first international underground film festival' but as time went on he felt increasingly unsupported by the film world. Jackie comments how she feels that other filmmakers and people in the industry never really liked Jeff's work but it was the Punks in the 70's and 80's who really embraced him. Jackie seems frustrated when she says that she was told it's because they have "(…) never networked. Jeff doesn t bother himself with such things. He is a very strong-minded man who knows what he wants, he likes to give the impression that his films just happen without planning or consideration but there is a lot more thought that goes into them than he would have you believe".

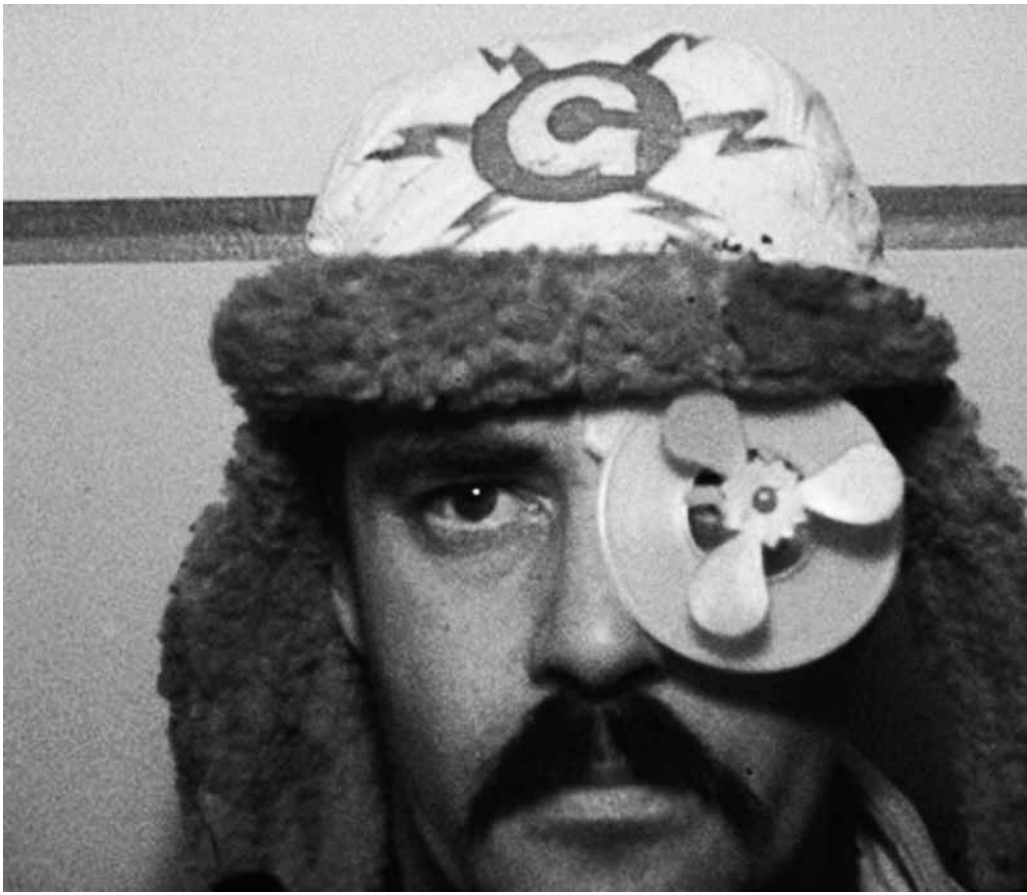
Jeff and Jackie have recently found themselves in a difficult position; they are being evicted from their home and have nowhere to go. Jackie talked about this a lot and it was clear that the situation was causing them a great deal of anxiety. Jeff's films have never made any money and due to his uncompromising nature he has never worked in the industry or made films for any other reason than personal drive. This is both admirable and a warning to young artists. It's a big issue that needs to be addressed at the start of your life as an artist. At what point do you compromise? Why do you want to make art?

And who are you making it for? Where do you stand in relation to art and economy?

It is only this year that Jeff's work has become available on DVD, the BFI have released a 9 hour overview of his work. Over the last 40 years he has been prolific with an output of hundreds of short films, drawings, poetry and books, now that I know about him and his work I am shocked that he isn t better known. Jeff comments that the BFI have been "going around catching interviews with old filmmakers before they die, just in case they are important". He has had recognition in fits and bursts throughout his career and he thinks that this is because he is not commercial enough. Jackie comments that it's because Jeff is the isolated artist in the most traditional sense and has no desire to network or suck up to the people in the industry. I admire this but wonder if the gains of 'playing the game' would be worth the small amount of compromise. For me this is a very relevant and immediate debate as I am at an early stage of a life as a filmmaker. I see in Jeff's philosophy a reflection of my own and I wonder if I believe in myself enough to risk poverty and the anxiety that comes with it. I am as yet at no resolution.

" At what point do you compromise? Why do you want to make art? And who are you making it for? "

What I like so much about his films is the feeling that they have been made so energetically, without hesitation and with instinct over intellect. There's such great spontaneity and honesty. Little time is spent on analysis; he just gets on with it and creates. He starts with an image or



a single idea and everything grows from that. One image becomes the next and in turn each film leads onto the next. The greatest compliment I can give a film is that it makes me want to do something. It inspires me to action, to make, create and go out into the world. Jeff's films have this effect on me. If you haven't seen his films I urge you to do so.

For more information on Jeff Keen
www.kinoblatz.com

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