

DUANE HOPKINS

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Questions & Answers

AV - Alessandro Vincentelli (BALTIC)

LH - Laura Harrington (BALTIC)

AV : Duane, you trained as a photographer and in fine art before turning to make films. With *Sunday* we have some really accomplished film sequences, You work like a photographer & you are clearly interested in the framed image? What relationship do you have with photography?

It's a way of rearranging the world, of concentrating the gaze, of emphasizing a certain way of seeing, of creating a unique atmosphere. I originally studied painting but there was a level of craft that needed to be achieved before you could concentrate fully on expression through the arrangement of objects that was annoying. Your compositional skills could be interesting but if your technical level was not high enough for what you were trying to achieve then your work wouldn't have the required impact. I had to make my images and atmospheres more impressionistic than I would have liked. I liked painting very much but when I was introduced to photography I realised that I was less interested in the ideas of mark making and other drawing elements than I was in pure composition, the relationship and the air between objects, that figurative and yet abstract tension. I also liked the mix of technical, practical elements like apertures and lenses that had to then be mapped onto what you wanted to achieve artistically. I liked having something real and concrete to interact with that I then had to filter through a technical apparatus to create something new. The engagement with the real world felt more tangible and the work and the new atmospheres more powerful because of that. You could see the real world and you recognised it, but it was distorted and almost better.

My relationship to photography is the same as my relationship with film and other mediums. I'm simply trying to make the most atmospheric work I can. It needs to be pictorially strong, narratively mysterious and yet easily comprehensible. You have to be able to understand it intuitively. The mission is always the same; to strip away the non-essential, to be complex and yet simple, obvious and yet oblique, to make something that you feel physically, not cerebrally.

LH. Knowing two of your earlier works *Field* and *Love me or Leave me Alone* I am aware that that the main characters are also featured in *Sunday*. These two early films have stayed with me. It is therefore difficult to view *Sunday* without ignoring these films. Many of the visitors to BALTIC will be unaware of your previous films. How important is it for you that *Sunday* takes on a separate or new narrative?

It's important. They are very different works in form & structure yet there are obvious similarities because they come from the same set of material. Whenever I shoot a film I will quite often film things that I know will never make it into the film, but I have the equipment – the camera and sound – and the crew to make these images, so I have to take the opportunity. I still want to create them even if they do not serve an obvious purpose for the narrative I am officially there to make. I don't always know their future purpose, it is through the editing later that I will find if the images have a context and an application, and when I say editing I mean more in a photographic editorial sense than in a traditional film making one. In some ways I use the camera on set like a reportage photographer not just a narrative filmmaker.

When it came to editing FIELD I would find when looking at the rushes that I was often struck by the long takes of the character still and inert in their environment. As a viewer I would disappear into them. There seemed to be a natural and yet strange dialogue happening within the image. It was like I was seeing in an oblique way what I had always felt in those environments when I was young, or at least the narrative and emotion I had imagined to myself at the time, I certainly recognised something. There was a connection, but one that was incongruous and mysterious, serene and yet loaded with anxiety, beautiful really. It was exciting to see these images and to have all the context removed, just the atmosphere left. It moved me and felt like something new. Because of this a lot of the narrative comes from the viewer. My idea was then to create just enough pictorial and edited narrative to hold the atmosphere, nothing more. That is when the form was created, 3 or 2 images, mirrored & staggered etc. Then the viewer's interaction with the carefully shifting atmospheres suggests everything. Some of the pieces like BRIDGE and LAMP POST are more like photographs or even paintings than films. They barely move but you are aware of the temporal foundation in the work, which then creates an added tension in the form, there is a pulse so to speak, a dialogue between the images. They exist in a kind of half space between two ideas, moving image & still life. That creates a great space for the viewer to exist in. They know there is life, movement, breathing, but it is suspended, trapped. For a moment you are free to contemplate it without it seemingly being aware of you, the spectator. Without it demanding you make sense of it or follow it.

I think it would be almost impossible for me to create this work, the atmospheres and experience that I do in the SUNDAY pieces in a cinema. People's reference points and expectation levels are too fixed when they sit down to watch a film to be able to offer them work like this (or at least for it to have the same effect). In a gallery context it is easier for them to be more open to a more radical interpretation of temporality and editing grammar, not to mention narrative and story. They can leave and come back and it is no slight on the work. The focus is less on narrative; or rather the form of the expected narrative is not so narrow. In that way, it is not that it is important to me personally that the SUNDAY work takes on a separate or different narrative, it is just how it is, it does. It is different work in a different context, there is no doubt.

LH. Why is it important for you not to show the films alongside the works in *Sunday*?

Because then it would become about a comparison and that is not the point. It could become about 'which did you prefer' which is not a valid question. FIELD is a much more fixed story, designed for cinema. SUNDAY is all about suggested realities, designed for a gallery. Though of course the aesthetic is unified, as the same person has made them.

LH. What made you want to bring your work into a gallery context?

I think I answered this a little bit above, but to be more specific a lot has changed in cinema over the last 40 years. The contract between the cinema audience and the filmmaker has changed. I think it has become a very conventional relationship. I think the agreement between artist and spectator in a gallery is more like the old relationship between filmmaker and audience in a cinema. It is one based on trust but also in mutual appreciation of risk (and the potential benefits of that risk) and being open to a challenge and the unknown, the expectations are not so rigid. I believe that in the hey day of arthouse or cultural artistic cinema (and I say 'hey day' in terms of audience numbers not in quality of output as I believe the quality of today's artistic cinema is extremely strong as there are many, many good directors at work today) there was a certain mystery that was allowed to exist between the film and the audience, an unknowable element, I think this is very prevalent in the work of some of the old cinema masters. This has been lost in contemporary cinema, or at the very least heavily marginalised, in pursuit of commercial gain. The restrictions on creating radical cinema are becoming tighter, and most alarmingly, people's options to view it in good conditions (cinemas) are diminishing. But having said that, the decision to place this work in a

gallery is not a political one, I've always liked the gallery space and what it offers. For the audience to not be passive and seated when viewing work. For them to be able to walk around, to get close, to stand back, to leave. As an artist I wanted to experiment, to try a new grammar in a context that I thought would accept it and it could flourish in. For every idea you must choose the correct context and form, for SUNDAY it was a gallery.

LH: You have described *Sunday* as a social-realist fairytale could you discuss this a little further

This is really an answer to how my feature film BETTER THINGS and my previous short films, have been critically approached by some. There has been a trend to discuss them strictly in terms of their relationship to - and as a continuation of - British Social Realism. This I think misses many of the aspects of the work. I do not make documentaries, I don't purport to be representing anyone politically or socially in any concrete way, I don't use direct sound, I use voiceover, I have a very heavy image grade with a very dense non-realistic sound design. I use almost every opportunity to move away from reality in the films themselves. I'm not so much interested in reality. Only as a starting point for something that then twists and subverts it, and morphs into something else that tries to transcend it. That reaches for an idea of the sublime, but still retains all the anxiety of the real world. In fact, maybe even amplifies it. For me this is not social realism, I use some of the subject and technical foundations; working class, non-actors, real locations, very restricted art design, but they are cut up and reassembled into something else; a different form. I'm told my work is bleak, but really it has the same relationship to reality as a fairytale does. It is all about mood and texture, a comment on reality, but it is not reality itself. There is a moral but it is a metaphorical one. The work also has a very real strain of romanticism, and so it is a stylised bleakness, like a sad or heart-rending piece of music. It is another world. In a way SUNDAY is a reaction to that, to try and push the non-real elements further. To make it obvious. To work purely with atmosphere, with sensation.

AV. In Sunday, most of the way you photograph your youth are as isolated figures, why is this?

To make you concentrate on the individual not the group, not the social. To make you look inside them. I just wanted to consider the individual and the relationship between their internal world and the environment. The work then takes on a purer and simpler tension between its elements as there are less. It's more distilled.

AV. With the five works, we have at BALTIC they create an immersive environment contrasting between film projection and works presented on screens. What kind of spaces are you trying to create? How different is this to sitting in a cinema to view the work?

In the end my aim is only to create an atmosphere and for that atmosphere to be as fully realised and as encompassing as possible. I knew I was after a kind of 'dream' quality. Something other-worldly and trancelike, it is simply about the best use of the space to achieve that.

Technically, all the pieces have the potential to be shown either as projections or on screens. It is really about a balance between the exhibition spaces and the pieces themselves, to find their correct form of presentation in relationship to the space.

In a cinema you are so much more passive and therefore your patience and your expectation is different. It really is amazing how differently you subconsciously approach a piece a work according to context and presentation. I guess it is to do with all the baggage we associate with the different modes of exhibition. Gallery vs cinema etc. In a gallery I think you will work to engage with the piece a little more, be less demanding on what the piece 'owes' to you as a spectator, but of course it is not that simple. What I mean is that you have no expectation of

an unfolding narrative that works in terms of cause and effect story, as in a cinema. You still want a narrative, and will look for one, but it can be based on much more radical and subtler terms, tone, atmosphere, space, image & sound, etc. The interesting thing is that I believe your experience and appreciation will be just as rich. The only rule for me is; be compelling.

In terms of it being immersive, it's something I'd like to pursue. The next set of installation works - that are already in post production - have an even more immersive quality. I'd like to make something that is over-whelming, that is truly physical and sensory. All encompassing. This might not be the next pieces, but I have ideas as to how to achieve this.

AV. What relationship do you have with narrative? Sequences appear to build – through sense of contrast and discontinuous shots.

I don't like obvious narratives. I like something that pulses, that builds slowly and binds the aesthetic elements. The creation of a discreet but powerful momentum, that to me is narrative. I don't want plot. I want something that gets under my skin without my noticing it. That moves and compels me without me being consciously aware that it is happening, that I am being manipulated. That is when I am immersed in something and I can believe in it without seeing the artist's sleight of hand.

In terms of how you do that, you're right, it is all about contrast and juxtaposition. About putting things side by side and seeing what the equation is, what the sum is. That is editing and montage in a pure form. No story tyranny, just emotion. We will build our own narrative as long as there is enough for our imaginations to work with, and that the work is pleasurable. Take LIONS for example, the meaning and power is built up through a narrative rhythm that uses his POV as a way of creating tension and suggesting relationships between himself and his environment. At first he seems disorientated but slowly he re-orientates himself through the environment. Nothing is happening, but everything is there, and there is absolutely a tension, a very discreet but concrete story in a way. The same with CIGARETTE AT NIGHT, there is definitely a narrative there. It's beautiful to create something that is deceptively simple but creates complex sensations in the viewer.

This is mistaken as not being narrative, but narrative has to be in the work. It has to be in any work. It's how we interact with something and deconstruct it, form a relationship to it. But narrative can mean so many different things, it can have many different expressions.

AV. Landscape, is a powerful presence in the films. However it is neither majestic, nor picturesque. It is just there? (To me it appears witness to the boredom and photographed (blue/grey) that conveys the somewhat lost/bleak sensation of emptiness that you have in the youth photographed. Is that how you remember the landscape, is it the landscape of your childhood?

Firstly I'd agree that the landscape is an external expression of their internal lives. But it also works as a juxtaposition rather than a true reflection. It can work in contradiction also, that is why there is always a dynamic that shifts and changes there. I don't however think the youth are lost. If they are lost then it implies that they can somehow be 'found' and I don't believe that. They are simply 'there' in their environment, for better or worse, looking for something and experiencing what is around them and it's sensory effects on them. Hopefully, the same as the audience.

As for whether it is the landscape of my childhood, it must be in some way. My childhood was very good, full of incident and trouble, I was maybe what you'd call a bad kid, a little disruptive. I gravitated towards the kids who were up to no good, as they would say. They were interesting as they already had expression. They knew who they were and were fearless, which are very attractive qualities. I got into a lot of situations, I liked experience. Always provoking things to happen but always watching as well. I was very desensitised to my environment, I think you always are desensitised to where you first grow up until you move

away and re-approach it with more objective eyes. In that way it can be majestic but just not to you. Maybe it does bear 'witness' as you say, as one thing I do certainly believe about the landscape is that it is impassive. No matter what happens to you, or how you feel, it will simply stare back at you, that is a sensation I remember extremely vividly. Even though I tested what was around me in a kind of abrasive way I was also aware of something more. An element I couldn't define. I don't believe in God, but for some reason I believe in something in spite of myself, even though I try not to. Maybe that is what I try to put into my work. That is possibly what you are always trying to recognise in what you film and make tangible for other people. The sensation and possibility of something else existing.

AV There is something of the unpredictable and yet there is also a lot of waiting Do you have an interest in a kind of horror genre?

Yes, but only recently, over the last 3 years or so. Before then not much, there were just a few classics of the genre I liked. Now, however I'm very interested in it. The reason is because the genre can be so pure, your job is simply to scare the audience, to create anxiety, to open them up to fear, it's very primal. However, the quality of the work will balance on what type of fear you open them up to, the level and complexity of the emotion of the experience. I would love to make something that worked on this level but was very subconscious. Maybe it is not so much horror I'm interested in, as really 'horror' is the end product, but rather the production of tension. That in a way is all that film is.

AV Time has a peculiar role, certain moments feel like they extend for ever?

This again takes us to the description of 'social realist fairytales', there are real elements, the boys and their environment, but the rendering and arrangement of it is like that of another world. I wanted to make something that could remind someone of being drugged. Of an altered perception, of having your senses slightly rearranged, of the rational elements being shut down and the physical sensory ones being opened wider. I'm glad you feel that way about time within the work. I like the sound of these moments extending and circling themselves. That I imagine is one of the things you can feel when you're on drugs in the middle of an empty field.

LH. In *There are No Lions in England* you have chosen an early track by Aphex Twin to be included as part of the work and for *Strange Little Girl* a Stranglers track has been used. What was the decision behind putting existing music with the images within this context?

There's several things; I've always loved the use of music in films, the interaction between image and music can be such a powerful one but I've stayed away from using it myself. I wanted to experiment with it. It's practical and also aesthetic, firstly they help immensely with the above ideas of creating atmosphere etc, but it is not a cheap trick or gimmick, they have to add. I also wanted the pieces to not be overly cerebral and intellectual but to be emotional and accessible. I wanted work that allowed me to explore more oblique strategies of image editing and music is a reference point for the audience as to how to decipher and interact with the montage. Though that is more in relation to *STRANGE LITTLE GIRL*, which is why there are two versions, one with the music and one without. I was curious (and still am) about what the music gives and also takes away.

The music for *LIONS* gave an atmospheric backbone, a mood and a slight extra narrative thrust to the piece towards the end. The piece works very well without music but with music it is simpler to comprehend, to access it, there is an argument for me that this makes it more complex though of course there is also the counter argument that it also makes it too simple, too easy, that the music guides you too much. For me, it just helps create the correct space inside the viewer. I did consider showing both pieces exclusively without music but I felt I would discover more about them as pieces if I showed with the music. In terms of the choice

of music, the ambient works of Aphex Twin have still yet to be matched, there is comparable work by the likes of Spacemen 3 (certain new pieces that have been roughly edited make use of this music) and other people but there is a quality in these ambient works that is unnerving and yet also serene, much like the piece itself. It is a good match.

However, the real reason for the use of both of the pieces of music is that they were part of the original conception, it is what gave me the obvious rhythms, and of course, because I find them a beautiful watch.