

last words

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CONSIDERING CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

JASON WOOD



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Dedicated to the memory of Artificial Eye co-founder Andi Engel who understood that film is an industry, but also an art. And vice versa.

This book is also dedicated to the memory of Walter Wood.

FORE WORDS

by Andrew Kötting

The more injured you are by time – the more you seek to escape it – to write a faultless page – or only a sentence – it raises you above becoming and its corruptions – and you transcend death by the pursuit of the indestructible in speech – in the very symbol of nullity.

E.M. CIORAN – THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN

In This World

The Old Kent Road had a hold of me – motorbike on top of me – someone had driven into me – the blood spilled out from the femoral artery – I felt a warm oilglow piss all over me – I hadn't long in this world – me and my biography – *Lookatme* and *Woeisme* – I was awash and still it came gushing out – then a policewoman tiptoed through the mire to help me – she pushed hard into me – a gore-soaked poultice – 63 stitches – picture that – picture this – picture the puss – pictures – the story begins thus

My grandfather Albert (Gladys's husband) took me to the pictures – *Enter the Dragon* – *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* – He told me that pictures could be dangerous – (he'd once found a photograph of somebody with their legs blown off up a tree) – but he didn't frighten me – *Hold the whole world up in front of a mirror for us all to see* – this was my philosophy – but real life had fallen into the cracks between myself and my work and caused much misery – deliriously – *The trouble with being born*

So

Ever onwards – forewards – an introduction as opposed to an outroduction – a reflection and pontification upon the main **stream (of consciousness)** – and all

this from *the moon that dreamed like an elephant's piss* – (post-accident morphine haze) – and into the uncharted pondwater of befuddled misremembrances – McQueen with his falling house and epic eye for detail – McQueen and the sexy train scene now followed by TS Eliot's agonies:

*Or as, when an underground train, in the tube
Stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades to silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about.*

The *shoutingout* and melancholy of the nothing-but-the-body – Carol Ann Duffy with her mirror in **I Remember Me** – *It must be dreams that make us different – must be the private cells inside a common skull* – The same but different – The shouting-out and melancholy of the *nothingbuthebody* – the same but different – **Main Stream** as the common current through which thoughts of the masses might easily flow – clones and echo chambers – pale imitations of themselves and real life – compromised committees – bandwagoneering not pioneering – universal not personal – the production of film not the medium of film – long-in-the-tooth and eversotired – straight from the board's mouth – devolved to the lowest common denominator – vanilla not rum and raisin

Sad

One can be sad anywhere but sadness grows in intensity within the confines of closed spaces – within the confines of a cinema that keeps showing the same faces – again and again and again – melancholy flourishes in open spaces – melancholy is fire-in-the-belly – is Nick Cave and Ned Kelly – Get out there and look for it – Not as business interest or capital venture but more an attempt at *punctum* – more an attempt at trying to make meaningful that which is meaningless – Gideon Koppel and his sheep – Clio Barnard and her ability to make you weep – the world closing in as real outburst and controlled angst – it can get lonely – Not Octavio Paz *Labyrinth of Solitude* lonely – more a really out there lonely – wind in the face tears in the eyes lonely – isolation and outsiderdom fuels and inspires – allows for a reflection – distance causes desire

The Industry

Of Film filling the horizon – fetid stream of settledown – gulag and fish farm – the major studios drying their nets in the Nissan huts of comic-book ambition – (another issue being the risk of algal blooms from overcrowding) Big Fish in One-Big-Pond – oxygen depletion and idea starvation – blocking out the sun and polluting the head – Who would ever want to penetrate the perimeter fence

in order to swim in such fishy waters? Why dine at the table of plentitude when there are plenty of berries in the forest? Genre is a minimum-security prison in which all the guards are reading *Hello* magazine – contingent or specialised is elsewhere – An Edgeland where it might be possible to dive headlong into the *notknowing* – Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor have been there – Harmony Korine lives there

Outside In

Really out there – Not In and pretending to be Out – *Contingency Solidarity and Irony* – The struggle between pragmatism and poetry – between philosophy and high energy – This is what Richard Rorty and Tarkovsky have taught me – Or De Montaigne – (Prophet of the Enlightenment) A mind unable to sit still – Explorer of the great themes of existence – humanist skeptic and acute observer – Georges Perec – *A Void* and *Life a User's Manual* – Lives seen through the prism of one's own self-consciousness – intrigue me astound me – do more than entertain me – disrupt the very fabric of the life that surrounds me – cut holes in it and let the light shine in

Maybe I should start again?

When people talk about Modern Art they usually think of a type of art which has completely broken with the traditions of the past and tries to do things no artist would have dreamed of before. Some like the idea of progress and believe that art too must keep in step with the times. Others prefer the slogan the-good-old-days and think that modern art is all wrong.

E.H. GOMBRICH – THE HISTORY OF ART

Why do you have to be a non-conformist like everybody else?

Beyond the turmoil and effervescence of the busy life a quieter existence enjoys the surrounding splendor – in all its exquisite detail – Ben Rivers has supped from this forest floor and regurgitated atop the veneer banqueting table of superficial pop – Calm through the absence of cacophony and CGI – an essential antidote to the business of mediocrity and commerciality – James Marsh and Anton Corbijn – mirrors of the mainstream but with more spit and less furniture polish

And you are not paying for art. You are paying for assurance, for social confirmation of your investment, and the consequent mitigation of risk. You are paying to be sure, and your assurance is very expensive, because risk is everything, for everybody, in the domain of art.

DAVID HICKEY – AIR GUITAR

The peloton of commercial success

And all those films that you hear far too much about – shining examples of perfected advertising – propaganda and manipulating – riding roughshod over embryonic Jarmans Framptons and Potters – old school breakaway groups – pockets fairly full to overflowing with the not-knowing and the questing – we are enriched only by frequenting disciplines remote from our own

Risk

So all risks are modeled on those that have gone before – the cakes might look different but the ingredients are the same – the butchers the bakers and the candlestick makers all setting up stall in the matching market square – where is the precarious instability and awkward vulnerability? Tilda Swinton, Peter Strickland and Ben Wheatley – come show me

Alternative

Error as a celebration and distortion of truth – and these works are erroneous because they drink from the trough of marginal truth – they re-present themselves as regurgitated half truths – exhilarating and roughly hewn stabs of new happinesses

It is important to acknowledge the instability of truth when making a film based on fact

CLIO BARNARD

You can't leave your brain at home on the sofa; you need to bring it with you to this cinema

LIAM CUNNINGHAM – FATHER DOMINIC MORAN – HUNGER

The sometimes

Sometimes lost – sometimes beached – sometimes abandoned – sometimes felt – sometimes known – sometimes wrong – sometimes lacking – sometimes needful – sometimes stunning – always questioning

There are no answers and there are not even any proper questions

IAIN SINCLAIR – SWIMMING TO HEAVEN

So

I leave you optimistic – the eternal quest – voyage without End – kicking against the pricks – needful of something to fight against but never alone – ongoing

PS

I happened upon this implied narrative yesterday on the way home from work. Culled from the side of the road in the form of a tumbledown neon sign: **COURTYARD AVAILABLE FOR SMOKERS AND NATURISTS**

Meaning through free association

Because of David Shields, Iain Sinclair and Jason Wood

ANDREW KÖTTING, HASTINGS OLD TOWN, JULY 2013

Andrew Köttling was born in Elmstead Woods, England and went on to become a lumberjack in Scandinavia. Later, as an artist he trained at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, specialising in performance and film. He directed several experimental shorts that were awarded prizes at numerous international film festivals. *Gallivant* (1996), his debut feature film, is a seminal travelogue about his three-month journey around the coast of Britain with his grandmother Gladys and his daughter Eden.

In 2001 he directed the first of his Landworks trilogy, *This Filthy Earth*, for Film 4 and in 2009 *Ivul* for Artificial Eye. He continues to work on multi-media art projects including *Mapping Perception*, *In The Wake of a Deada* and *Louyre*. *This Our Still Life* premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in 2011.

His most recent work, *Swandown*, was made in collaboration with the writer Iain Sinclair and shown extensively in cinemas across the UK and as an installation at Dilston Grove in London. The film had its French premiere at the Cannes Film Festival and will be distributed in France by E. D. Distribution.

Most recently Andrew was commissioned to work with the photographer Anonymous Bosch on a series of pinhole photographs inside a cave on top of the Mountain of Fear in the French Pyrenees.

Introduction

Published interviews with filmmakers are increasingly becoming a thing of the past. In a media enthralled by the notion of stardom and dictated to by commerce it has become rare to read an extended interview with a filmmaker, unless that filmmaker has made a film featuring a star that is likely to go on and make a considerable amount of money at the box office. The world of film PR is now so rigorously patrolled that even many A-list filmmakers rarely grant one-on-one interviews and when they do they are shoehorned into a twenty- or thirty-minute window; a time constraint that hardly allows for a detailed consideration of the work.

Every now and again a British filmmaker will appear and deliver a film that generates both critical and commercial heat and will thus earn themselves and their film column inches. Tom Hooper was everywhere after the success of *The King's Speech* (2010) as was Sam Mendes after breathing yet more life into the bloated, anachronistic corpse of the James Bond franchise with *Skyfall* (2012). Veteran British auteur types such as Ken Loach and Mike Leigh are also figures whose films and histories can be considered to reasonably justify interview time. If there is a story attached to the production, a couple of plucky first timers may break through. Peter Strickland's *Katalin Varga* (2009) became the story of a film made on an inheritance cheque whilst Clio Barnard's exceptional *The Arbor* (2010) had a journalistic angle in its tactic of having actors sync the words of actual people. Both films were deserving of the attention they were given.

The majority of the interviews in this collection are with British filmmakers who may otherwise have their work and their sensibilities go under the radar. British directors also frequently find themselves corralled together in a kind of catch-all piece designed to give the impression of editorial support. The *Observer* recently ran a series of short interview pieces with directors including Richard

Ayoade, Clio Barnard, Amma Asante and Joanna Hogg ('British Film on the Crest of a Wave', Tom Lamont, *The Observer*, 15 September 2013) off the back of recent festivals at Toronto and Venice. Despite the fact that each of these filmmakers operate in a very different style they were all placed together in a 'the British are coming'-type piece in which it was clear that the writer of the article had seen few if any of the actual films in question.

The move towards the mainstream has become unstoppable. Recent franchise and other unashamedly populist titles such as *Kick-Ass* (2010), *Avengers Assemble* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013) and *This is 40* (2013) were all given four- and five-star 'lead review' treatment even in broadsheet publications such as the *Guardian*, the nation's favoured critical barometer. The traditional art-house releases, which over the last decade have increased in number to saturation point, are forced to take their place amongst the pack with even a well-reviewed title relegated to fourth or fifth billing and a review, no matter how positive, that may run to little more than a paragraph.

Periodically, most commonly on a quiet week for Hollywood, a specialised or foreign-language film such as *I Wish* (2011), *Our Children* (2012), *Amour* (2012) or *In The Fog* (2012) may enjoy top billing but these instances must now be considered anomalies. In reality these specialised titles rely on reviews to attract audiences as they simply don't have the benefit of a considerable marketing and advertising budget to increase their profile and broaden their reach. Without editorial support, and critics invariably blame editorial policy for the recent downsizing of attention to 'niche' titles, they have little chance of finding an audience and could conceivably disappear from our screens and our collective psyches.

With diminished review space, non-mainstream and foreign-language directors have become all but invisible and it is rare indeed to read an interview with a filmmaker who could be considered in some way specialised, a generic term that could be taken to mean foreign-language or aesthetically or financially independent in some way. There are, of course, a number of directors who can command press attention by virtue of the fact that their films regularly win international prizes, achieve a certain amount of box office and generally enjoy a wide release outside of their native domestic territories. Figures such as Pedro Almodovar, Michael Haneke and more recent additions to the ranks including Michel Hazanavicius and Asghar Farhadi are, however, firmly in the minority.

With the exception of *Sight and Sound*, which at the time of writing carries an interview with Abbas Kiarostami, there is little space given over either to more niche or unheralded auteurs or newly emerging voices whose work displays quality or distinction. The publication cannot carry the torch alone and for reasons related to space or economy – though subsidised it also has to generate income and shift copies – often has to prune back the word count for a piece on a specialised title in favour of a more headline-grabbing act. The aforementioned July

2013 issue places an interview with Richard Linklater for *Before Midnight* (2013) front and centre whilst Kiarostami's *Like Someone In Love* (2012) has a more back-seat view. Jonathan Romney, a regular contributor to the magazine and one of the most high-profile supporters of specialised film has just been let go by *The Independent on Sunday*, a move which follows Robbie Collin replacing Sukhdev Sandu at *The Telegraph*. It is utterly conceivable that in an age when everyone has a digital voice that many national newspapers will stop covering film entirely. More critic casualties are certain to follow.

The demise of *Vertigo* was a considerable blow to both artists' cinema and world and European filmmakers and there has been nothing in the UK to replace it. There is also, as far as I can see, little evidence to suggest that online publications are filling the chasm created by the problems facing the printed press. There is more a sense digital déjà-vu, a repetition of pieces that we have already consumed elsewhere.

All of which is, of course, an attempt to justify the existence of *Last Words*. A follow-up of sorts to my earlier collection, *Talking Movies: Contemporary World Filmmakers in Interview* (2007) and thus possibly the least anticipated film publication ever. This book collects together interviews with filmmakers and are all culled from conversations that have been conducted without interference over numerous years as a film programmer and occasional journalist. Many of these pieces have not appeared elsewhere and many were conducted as on-stage post-screening discussions, perhaps the last refuge of the in-depth film director interview. My preference has always been for film interviews to be published as transcripts to allow the filmmaker to communicate their ideas in an unfiltered form. The transcript is also a tactic for discounting the often-colossal ego of the interviewer and the supposition that readers are desperate to learn of the extent to which the interrogated and the interrogator got along. It is in transcript form that the interviews are presented to you here, with anything other than comments relating to the work itself judiciously removed.

The short introduction to each individual interview will hopefully indicate why I felt it was worth including (Christopher Nolan sticks out like a sore thumb but the interview was conducted pre-*Batman*), but in general this book is intended as a tool for people interested in cinema that occupies new or different territories. It also seeks to provide first-hand accounts of the filmmaking process from figures who could be considered to have a unique, challenging or non-conformist aesthetic vision. You may not have read these figures discussing their films in depth before and if the residual eradication of film culture continues in our press and on our screens there is a genuine danger that you may not hear their voices or opinions in the future.

