

Interview with Sophie Fiennes: Risk is the Holy Grail We Need to Hold Onto

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1. You have mostly, even though not exclusively, done what is commonly referred to as “documentaries”. Yet, you have impressively demonstrated the variability, maybe fluidity of this genre and category. Your movie on Kiefer is quite different from the one with Žižek and certainly again different from the one on and with Grace Jones. Could you tell us a little about what it means for you to do a “documentary”?

‘Documentary’ is most compelling for me when seen simply as the capture of time into a material that can take many forms; song and oral traditions, certainly painting and the written word. It precedes cinema. It is document as remainder, a moment witnessed and lost – except for the document. There is something pathetic and exceptional in this. And a work will also change in time.

Starting out I was drawn to the early experiments in filmmaking, with their haphazard sense of astonishment that time could be captured and retrospectively re-animated, the dead brought back to life, people made to walk backwards and objects to fly. It’s both the concrete moment and the magic of the medium that fascinates me. It isn’t that documentary is objective truth, nothing is more subjective than the editing process, but there are truths that speak for themselves in the smallest of moments and it’s what these can do to each other across a film that can be revelatory.

‘Documentary’ is also a set of guiding principles I might choose to push against or engage in. The form of my films vary because the subjects vary. It really is that simple. I’m like a bloodhound smelling out where the meat is and the form emerges through this. There is the doing, the constant reflecting, the failure, the risk, the necessity to get lost and then assemble moments of real time into ‘scenes’. It’s a hybrid between observational ‘*objects trouve*’, and the compression of footage into a structure that is in many ways fictional but echos poetry more than prose, as film is made of fragments. While I am responding to the subject, I am also engaged in an invisible, imagined relationship with another, a viewer’s, perception and sensibility.

2. You once said that “cinema is the space in which [you] feel most at home.” And you continued by stating: “That’s why my response is to make films for the cinema, to insist on cinema.” What is the specificity of the cinematographic space for you? What is the difference between, say, cinema and television (if the latter still exists)?

This is because of the mark left by my own experience watching films in the cinema. I experience it as closer to theatre, with more ritual and magic than TV, flatscreens or smart phones. A strange mental landscape is entered into; my waking self is partly suspended as the images seduce,

fascinate, provoke and sometimes bore, which is also important as part of an internal expansion. The projected image is bigger than life, but paradoxically more intimate.

Watching films outside of the cinema is like watching a copy, not the original. You might get the information, but not the experience. It's also worth pointing out that the editing rhythm is not the same. When the image field is bigger, it takes more time for the eye and brain to process what is playing out up there. Films cut for the cinema might seem slow on a small screen, but hit their natural speed when projected. Much of today's cinema sacrifices cinematic space for speed and kinetic cutting, so the effect is more kaleidoscopic. The cinematic grammar that underpins American film noir for example is more than just about mood and shadows.

It's important the cinema is not marked out only for market driven product. Cinema's amplification of the smallest moment is what I enjoy most as a viewer. Before the invention of DVD and even VHS, there were repertory cinemas all over London. Twenty seater screening rooms projected films from 11.00 am up to midnight. When I was in my late teens this is where I went to watch films. It took some effort, now everything is available, which is fantastic, but the question of *how* films are watched is crucial.

3. Eisenstein once has the plan to make a film out of Karl Marx's *Capital*. But he never got to it (even though even a fragment of a screenplay exists). You did two films with Slavoj Žižek and one could have imagined before that this is something almost as impossible to do as to make a film out of Marx's *Capital*. Even though Žižek is very readable and constantly refers to different movies, his theoretical position can be quite difficult to fully get. You seem to have prevented some of the implied difficulties, by focussing not so much on Žižek himself – even though he appears in almost every scene of the movies – but on a concept or “phenomenon” (the movies and ideology). Could you tell us something about what it means to make a movie about a concept?

I think this is a case of fools rushing in where angels fear to tread. I left school at 16 and did a one year foundation course at art school. I'm not conventionally educated so don't have the sense of what is difficult or impossible, but respond to what can be communicated and how.

My mother was a writer and a passionate thinker and both my parents photographers. They were hopeless at making ends-meet; at one point we lived in a small cottage with no kitchen and a bathroom that was more of an outhouse. However, the central room was wall-to-wall with books collected over the years. My mother had been certified insane

several times and psychoanalysed in her early 20's after a dysfunctional childhood, so 'concepts', or what she would have called 'ideas', were more urgent than the food on the table. Biography was considered 'kitsch', it was important to go 'straight to the text.' In this sense, the films with Žižek were always going to be about 'the text', the theory and the films, not Slavoj himself.

Slavoj is a brilliant communicator, and refining and reducing the material we created felt like shaping a series of bullets. My aim is to go for as much complexity as possible, to where ideas feel just within reach. I need to keep the thread of thought-forms moving across the film, like shooting a series of arrows that need to hit their marks. I want to work with that experience of mental rupture Slavoj's work produces.

4. You have done two movies with Slavoj Žižek, *The Perverts Guide to Cinema*, and its sequel *The Perverts Guide to Ideology*. We agree with you when you said that cinema is a great tool to explore ideology. Could you tell us a little more about your position here?. How do movies embody ideology (if they, from your perspective, do that)? And, how does cinema relate to ideology critique? Is there a critique of ideology specific to the movies?

As humans we take to movies and ideology like ducks to water. We are ready to believe in a story, be drawn in, use it to shape the world and bring meaning. I recall a conversation with Slavoj where he emphasised how infuriating it was that non-believers are often seen as taking the easy option by choosing not to believe. “My God!”, he exclaimed, “do they not understand how hard it is *not* to believe!” Belief is our default setting.

The Pervert's Guide to Ideology broke new ground for me. We went beyond our love of movies and theory, but used both to show how ideological projects are 'built'. The emphasis on “being responsible for our dreams” felt crucial to the film. Fictional movies are also “documents” of the ideological consensus of their time.

This relationship between cinema and ideology forces me to question my own practice as a filmmaker and confront the uncomfortable truth that the moving image is *the* central propaganda tool, used with terrifying efficiency from Nazi Germany up to all kinds of fake news and mainstream news, today.

Financing films that critique ideology is hard! Financiers want to recoup their investments, and this has become more and more the only agenda. If you are not making money, you are not making sense, even though the business model in terms of exploitation makes it impossible to recoup. We are currently trying to finance the final film in our series, *The Pervert's Guide to The Twenty First Century*, despite our past achievements this is not easy.

5. In what sense can one understand movies as “guides”? Once you said: “I never embark on making films from the point of view that I’m a woman; I’m just making films, and then it’s a surprise that I’m a female film director.” If your movies are not “female” movies, do you nonetheless consider them to be political?

It’s impossible to make work and be non-political even in the broadest sense of the word. I do seek to up-set some apple carts. Making films is a process through which I push myself and take risks with form and material. If I knew exactly what I was making from the outset it wouldn’t be an engaging process, I wouldn’t have the necessary nervous and ‘hysterical’ energy. In terms of my films with Slavoj, ‘guide’ is a term that suggests this is not a dramatic narrative, but a set of propositions and a polemic.

6. If we think of your films, say your *Hoover Street Revival* (2001) or *Grace Jones: Bloodlight and Bami* (2017), our impression was that the fascinating dimension of them was somehow linked to what appears to be a documentation of a specific time. Is this something you aimed for or is this rather only our impression?

Yes. This is true. What drives me to shoot observational footage is discovering how in committing real time to film/video a kind of transubstantiation can occur. Framing is crucial, it can unlock or generate layers of sense and inference that accumulate in the moments captured. This is most fascinating when it’s subtle. I try to let the material I am gathering speak to me. Shooting *Hoover Street Revival* I became intrigued by the echoes of biblical imagery in the most banal of things. I heard fragments of poems in my head from the period I love, the English metaphysical poets of the 17th Century. This process or response recurs in the more stable environment of the editing, where editing feels like writing with time.

Initially some critics were disconcerted that *Grace Jones: Bloodlight and Bami* was not full of archive, given all the stunning and iconic imagery of Grace Jones. But that imagery lives in Grace’s body. The film didn’t need to refer to archive. I explored this, but it quickly broke a spell. It suggested comparisons that were crude, journalistic and less interesting than shaping the time collected in my encounters with Grace herself. Our footage was its own Grace time-capsule and I can account for the truth of those moments, because I was there.

7. Walter Benjamin writes that “only film can detonate the explosive stuff which the nineteenth century has accumulated in that strange and perhaps formerly unknown material which is kitsch. But just as with the political structure of film, so also with other distinctively modern means of expression (such as lighting or plastic design): abstraction can be dangerous.”¹ How does film, and cinema in general from your perspective function in our century? In other words, what is the relation of cinema to its own time from your point of view? Does or can it present time and history?

There is no getting away from how films date, can seem remote and irrelevant. This ‘failure’ reflects how historical film is. The real wonder is when films or works of art retain their life, can still shatter us and cut across time. I watched Rosellini’s *Rome, Open City* again and it tore me apart.

8. Sergei Eisenstein claimed that cinema breaks away with the classical modes of representation and is thus able to articulate or even create a meaning beyond that which are made possible either by language, or by the photographic image. Does that sound convincing to you?

I do agree because film at its best is more unruly than language, its grammar less academic, less stable. I don’t know if meaning is a word I would choose as the moving image is opaque, dumb in the sense of speechless. There are dictionary definitions for words, but image moments are more evasive. The expressions that pass across a human face in a moment of time are at odds with any attempt to describe what they tell. It’s hard for actors to compete with the untrained gaze of the non-actor. When cinema contrives too much, it becomes obvious, kitsch or camp, which is not without its pleasures. But when the truth of fragmentation inherent to film is well handled, cinema’s mode of representation is beyond other forms but combines and responds to them. I was always interested by how Eisenstein found Joyce’s *Ulysses* essentially filmic.

9. What do you make of the abundance and huge contemporary success of the format of the series? Is this the new form of cinema (as some claimed when “The Wire” came out that it is comparable to the realist novel of the 19th century)?

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¹ Benjamin 2002, p.396

I simply do not have the time to watch them. They seem designed to fill up the content hole and are the product of the entertainment industry, designed to support home watching and all the tech that goes with it. They refuse the discipline of cinema, but don't contain the beauty of 'rushes' - the unprocessed raw material of film making. The random nature of YouTube surfing is more absurdly pleasurable and surprising for me.

10. There is this influential distinction between say, Hollywood blockbusters, as a kind of trash cinema – at least often –, and what some refer to as 'fine' or art movie. What do you think of this distinction?

I deplore the labelling of films into groupings such as 'art movie.' This started in the 1990's. Can't films exist outside such categories? It's the same with the use of 'world cinema' which simply means non-English speaking films. Hollywood wasn't always a term for trash cinema, but the death of strong independent production companies in the US, the dominance of studios and now Netflix and Amazon has clipped the creative wings of the industry. The apology for this comes in the form of a handful of Netflix product made with highly established directors and with such inflated budgets to make anyone else blush at the thought of recouping, not to mention the distribution and marketing costs. Netflix runs at a massive deficit.

11. How do you see the relation of cinema to other arts, say to theatre, or to painting, or to literature, especially to the novel? Many have been turned into films. One cannot but mention Jose Saramago's *Blindness* (directed by Fernando Meirelles, 2008) in the midst of pandemic Covid 19 (quite a few interesting parallels can be drawn between the novel and our current situation), or Ágota Kristóf's trilogy *The Notebook* (directed by János Szász, 2013). What do you think about these movements from literature to film (especially because you have already made movies about a singer, with a philosopher, and about an artist)?

I enjoy collaborating with people who have gone quite far out in their various practices and are tangled up in all kinds of complex, sometimes paradoxical and pleasurable zones. I meet them there as a film maker. There are limitations to what can be transposed to film, but sometimes film brings a new dimension to their work. With Kiefer, initially he just thought I should film what he had created, but I insisted the process was important, even a digger excavating a tomb-like space. He soon became excited by revealing his 'actions'; the making of the objects, but crucially the breaking too; the shattering of glass or plates or vessels.

Writers can explore ideas freely on their own terms and might produce a rich text and material for a film, but I think the narrative structures of theatre, film and literature don't have to conform to the same organising principles. For example the work of Pirjo Honkasalo and her extraordinary films, *The Three Rooms of Melancholia* or *Atman*, could never be created from a novel, or a novel from them. These films are so particular to documentary cinema and in my opinion do point to what Eisenstein was getting at; they articulate a meaning beyond that possible in language or photography.

12. You have done two documentary short films and two other short films (*First Row Orchestra* and *Hopper Stories*, both in 2012). What is interesting about the short(er) format? Does it lead to condensations? Is it another type of film or in what do you see its specificity?

I approach short films like working in a sketch book, or think of them as two maybe three short scenes or ideas. I made a lot when I was first experimenting with film, shooting on Super 8. No sync sound. It was a nice brief to work with; to imagine a moment behind one of Hopper's haunting paintings.

13. Can we ask two final and rather broad questions? What do you think is the task of cinema today (if there is any)?

That is a big and broad question, I'll try a pithy response: Risk is the Holy Grail we need to hold onto. Audiences don't know what they want until they see it. And we have to argue to make films for the cinema that are not only the big screen machine products. And we must keep watching and keep close cinema history, not lose touch with it.

14. And, it is hard to avoid this topic: what are your thoughts about the current pandemic?

I think this is a fascinating moment where the organic and fragile truth of our human bodies stands before the machine of production and consumption that felt like it was stealing something from us. Stealing Time itself. I don't want 'normal' to return. We know we have to change the order of things. We must insist that all stimulus packages invest in non-fossil fuel industries. This pause has been instructive. We need new industries, new models that see a future that is possible and we must learn from our mistakes. Even the 'social distancing' suggests a new sensitivity to human intimacy, the close up exchanged glance.