

Interview with the director

What was the initial spark for ‘A Certain Type of Freedom’ and ‘At the Edge of the Present’?

These projects came out of my research on cities, public space and young people. It all started when I realised that a lot of young people were so glued to their phones and devices that they felt they were not taking in or observing their surroundings. Public space is a very powerful means of engaging and bringing people together, so I wanted to find out more about the relationship between decreased youth engagement and increased use of technology. At the same time I was doing research on cities and urban landscapes whilst going around various cities taking photographs and observing spaces, and talking to architects and urban planners, especially in Athens. It was then, when I started transcribing the interviews with both the architects and the students, and started putting together the scholarly literature, that I noticed how powerful they were. I remember transcribing this particular interview in late 2013 and I came across this beautiful quote about the past and the present in connection to cities, and I realised that it had to be visualised. That made me look at some of the photos I had taken and I could suddenly see the link between the visuals and the material I had and how well it all worked together.

Are there any particular influences from cinema or from art to your work?

I’m sure there are. I have been a huge fan of films since early childhood, but I never thought I would actually make my own. Thus, I’m sure my visual vocabulary has been influenced by various genres in ways that I’m probably not even fully aware of myself. When you create something it’s natural to speak in a way that aligns with what you’ve learnt. One piece of art I distinctively know has influenced me is by this amazingly influential, but not very well known, French director called Chris Marker, who did a filmic essay called [La Jetée](#) in 1962. I first came across *La Jetée* after having watched the film [12 Monkeys](#) by Terry Gilliam, which is a loose adaptation of Marker’s work. *La Jetée* is a 28 minutes long science fiction featurette constructed mainly from still photos describing a post-nuclear war Paris, and it is incredibly powerful, engaging and atmospheric. So I thought if Chris Marker can use still photos to create one of the most powerful and influential narratives in the history of cinema, then it’s legitimate to use the visual essay as a means to get my message across.

There are other cinematic references in both films so

keen viewers will easily spot them. I thought it would be quite fun to “encode” the films with some subtle – and a couple of not so subtle – references to some of my favourite filmmakers and movies. I should also mention a documentary called [Hoop Dreams](#) by Steve James. This is one of my favourite movies of all time and talks about the barriers facing marginalised youth in the Chicago suburbs. They are basketball players and trying to make it to the NBA. I wanted at least one of the two films to pay a tribute to *Hoop Dreams* so that partly explains all the basketball hoops in *A Certain Type of Freedom*...

What did the production process look like?

The whole process of creating these projects was part of discovering the medium. The films are not conventional; there is not a lot of motion in them in terms of conventional video. We didn’t even start with a script and then went scouting for locations - it was literally the other way around. It started with the visuals and the ideas and the concept, and then we built the script around that. You could almost compare the process to sculpting – you realise what it is you want to do and then you dig down through the material until you reach a point where you finally feel you’ve materialised your vision. The bulk of the work took place from May to September in 2015. Up to May I had piles of interviews and literature, and 10,000 photographs, but there was no script, no plan and no actual production schedule. Around May I put together the scripts, and decided on the two concepts with the slightly different themes and pitches, kind of carving out the material for the short films. Then in June we did the narration recording with Sam Booth and after that it’s just a blur - choosing the music and the visuals, mixing the soundtrack, editing, putting everything together, it all just happened in a very short period of time. It was a very intense 4-5 months with lots of late nights, but at the same time one of the most creative, challenging and rewarding things I have ever done. I was lucky to have people around me who shared that vision and who “got” what I wanted to do. Occasionally I bet they thought I was crazy, but generally speaking they could really see where I was going with it.

What was most challenging with the creative process?

A huge challenge was not having the roadmap there, not having a How To-guide. It was such an instinctive and impulsive process, which was both the best and the worst part about it. My gut instinct often told me whether I should do



something or not, but this also meant that there was no safety net. I had to learn on the go - even practical things! I have never before done serious editing or serious mixing, I learned all those things because the project forced me to, and it was actually really good fun! It’s interesting when the practical elements partly shape your thinking about the creative pieces. You realise they are not two different bubbles. Instead, the technological or material reality intimately interacts with the creative idea. Naturally this is sometimes limiting but often it expands the horizon of what you can do and forces you to find solutions.

In the end I would say that the hardest part was not the creative or the production bit. It was always going to be how to promote and disseminate two movies that are neither conventional cinematic narratives, nor your typical online video lasting for a minute or two with cute cats and puppies. I love cute puppies, but that’s not what this is. *At the Edge of the Present* and *A Certain Type of Freedom* are both meditative and quite slow, offering another kind of ambience and demanding a different kind of attention from the audience. A fifteen minute online video thus has to compete with the distractions of being connected and having a gazillion windows and applications on at the same time, making it very hard to have a genuine experience in the same way you would

in a cinema. So the challenge was creating these avenues and outlets for people to watch these two documentaries. This happened in a number of ways - I was given the space in Salzburg, in Budapest and in Boston to screen the films to audiences genuinely interested in these topics, which was amazing. Getting these first screenings, although so early in the production process, was a really special moment for us, sharing something we had been working on for a long time. It was really scary and very different for me as an academic being used to so called invisible audiences of researchers reading and commenting on your articles.

What is the main difference between ‘At the Edge of the Present’ and ‘A Certain Type of Freedom’?

The overall format of the two films is generally very similar in terms of the visual language and the narration and the music, but their starting points and the scope of the arguments are slightly different. *At the Edge of the Present* mainly looks at urban coexistence and how we experience the city. It has three acts - Tribes, Lights, and Time – breaking down the concept of a city, looking at its core elements, and what you get is its building blocks. It’s the passage of time, a diversity of people

coming together, the creation of identity and community, with boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. It's talking about these big, abstract themes, but talking about them in a way that is grounded in people's daily experiences. As its core material *At the Edge of the Present* uses interviews that I did with architects and public space experts in Greece, but the scope of it aims to be global with photographs from over 20 cities in Europe and the United States. I would have liked for it to be truly global though I didn't have the time or the material needed, but maybe that is for a future project.

A Certain Type of Freedom looked more specifically at young people and their relationship with public space and the city. The research material for that was different and was collected from the various studies that we did with young people - *Unplugged* and *On Cities*. Thus, it was more about their voices coming through in the script. One of the key drivers was to show how insightful young people's own voices can be, and they have the most emotive and powerful ways of talking about issues that affect everyone. It's better than creative writing because it directly reflects the experiences of people who are the experts in their own lives. Allowing and enabling these voices to come out in a way that makes sense was really important to me.

The most satisfying and emotional thing for me is

when people respond to and engage with the film, commenting how they can identify with the themes, connecting them to their own experiences. The point of the movies is to facilitate a discussion about these issues.

How do the visuals support the themes and arguments of the films?

At the Edge of the Present is more of a creative form of writing and a bit more dramatised, so I wanted that to show in the photographs. For example, towards the middle there is a sequence that is quite dark and fast paced, talking about marginalised people outside the mainstream and outside the borders of what we consider acceptable. To demonstrate this, I wanted the visual language to be more about lights and shadows. The third act was about memory and time, themes which are a bit more straightforward to demonstrate through photographs. Generally, I tried to create an aesthetic framework that would allow people to use their own imagination.

A Certain Type of Freedom was a bit more complicated as it looks at human relationships and our relationship to space. Because it's about people it's harder to conceptualise. It uses 'bokeh' photography, which is when you use out of

focus points of lights producing a more abstract image. This ambiguity forces the audience to use their imagination to make the connections and to take the experience and fill it with their own. If you're too literal you're facing the danger of telling people how to read your text, so I was trying to avoid this at all costs.

It's really fascinating how different people's interpretations of the films were. I have been teaching about media, active audiences and different types of reading for 13 years now. To witness this in action with my own films was extraordinary, as people were giving new points of views on my own creation that hadn't crossed my mind before. Having that exchange of other people's perspectives is amazing, so being too close-ended and too literal risks dictating to the audience how you want them to interpret something, going completely against the point of the films. Rather we wanted the audiences to encourage people to engage with themselves and with public space, instead of telling them what to think.

Why did you work on such a tight schedule?

We decided for the deadline to be at the Salzburg Academy in the beginning August 2015, where I wanted to screen both films even if only a rough cut at the time. Occasionally you start a project and then you reach a point where, especially if there isn't a pressing deadline or outlet, you feel you've learned all you had to learn and you leave it aside. You think that you'll have the chance to complete it soon but it never happens and the project kind of rots in a drawer. That's happened to me a few times! *Laughs* This time I was determined not to do that. Therefore I felt that if I didn't finish the films before Salzburg, if I don't push myself, it was never going to happen. My new motto now is that "perfect is the enemy of good" and if you do your best and aim for good occasionally you do even better. At Salzburg, *At the Edge of the Present* was pretty much finished. We only had some final touches with the sound and resolution left to do. *A Certain Type of Freedom* on the other hand still needed a bit of work.

What was it like working with Sam Booth?

First of all I have to say that this wouldn't be even close to what it is without Sam Booth. Working with him was an amazing experience and I'm very honoured that he agreed to do this. I first saw Sam in *The Drowned Man*, an immersive theatre production by Punchdrunk at the National Theatre in London. *The Drowned Man* was a huge cultural, intellectual and physical experience for me – it affected me profoundly and has become a really important part of my life. Sam had a very commanding, mesmerising presence in the show – his character pulled the strings as it were, and in a way determined everyone's fate. Sam is an incredibly versatile

actor and gave the role a life that went beyond the confines of the performance space. He also has a unique voice that literally haunted everyone who ever saw *The Drowned Man*.

When I realised I wanted to do something that included a narration I just had that moment, in early May, when I realised it had to be Sam Booth. I literally couldn't or didn't want to imagine anybody else, and if Sam had said no I have no idea what I would've done. The whole process was piecemeal from the beginning. Initially it was going to be an academic documentary, then it became more elaborate and ambitious, then we thought "OK, we have this material, how far can we push it and ourselves?" And when Sam kindly agreed to join us, that's I thought we really need to do justice to his contribution.

So, what does the future look like? Are we to expect any similar projects?

Well, I usually don't like doing the same thing twice, and I can't imagine doing the exact same thing. The overall experience has generally been very rewarding. I find learning the language of creative multimedia really exciting, and I love the medium of the short documentary because it's a powerful tool, especially for academic researchers, not just showcasing our research but also to open it up to a real dialogue with the audience on issues people care about. I'm not sure whether my future projects will be in the format of visual essays - there are various ideas - but as I'm driven by my gut instinct there is never a precise and carefully laid out plan of what to do next. If I come across a location, a concept or some material that inspires me it will eventually take on a life of its own, giving me directions to what technical means and what format to use rather than me starting with a certain format in mind.

Generally speaking, I find this format a nice way of communicating ideas, and I have noticed that it's definitely reached a much wider audience than traditional research outputs would have reached. Perhaps the most important lesson of this experiment has been that non-experts, a general audience at large were able to engage with and appreciate it, whilst at the same time established academics were able to find value in it as well. Being able to find that balance between expert and non-expert audiences is a really interesting challenge for me. I think there are ways of having a meaningful dialogue between academia and 'the outside world'. What I know for sure is that any future projects will continue to try to walk that line between these two audiences.

Interview by Sofie Edlund
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