

Conversation between Adam Roberts, Miranda Pennell and Jonathan Romney, as filmed by Gordon Shrigley for the filmarmalade release of *Stiletto* by Adam Roberts 1997 revised 2009.

(Edited text)

Miranda Pennell (MP): Would you like to say something about the post production process which is one of the longest post production processes I've come across, because this film was produced in 1997?

Adam Roberts (AR): Yes. Well, it is true that it's taken from 1997 to 2009 to complete the edit! The film was originally made with a script written by someone else, the first and only time I've worked in that way. I stuck to the script because that was what was commissioned, that was what was agreed.

However I was very excited about the screenplay, even though it was a story that I wanted to do, specifically Saki's *Shredni Vashtar*, and it was my suggestion that we do this story.

The writer, who I had just been introduced to by the BFI, Mark Wheatley, had a great interest in contemporary themes and issues of the day. At that time he was particularly preoccupied with a book that had come out called *Goliath*, about aggression in young males. I can't remember who wrote it. Mark wanted to make a story about incipient violence in young men.

I didn't quite see *Shredni Vashtar* in that way. My feeling about it was much more that it about a particular kind of isolation. I feel that youth is always about that in some way – after all, every child discovers that their mother is not always there. This is a kind of essential, philosophical isolation. There is also a need to differentiate oneself from others, to flee from others and find oneself. But it is the to and fro between these poles that makes us, or breaks us.

And in this particular case, we have an extreme situation because here's a young man who hasn't got his mother at all. I think that much is clear even in the final form. And the other women in the film become hated simply because they're not the mother.

So that's what I liked - that, and fetishism, and the obsession with tactile qualities, and with the solidity of objects – all crucial to the boy because of the absence of solidity of an emotional kind, or any other benign presence.

The original film had been finished, replete with long dialogue scenes, built around a cargo of conflicts, and all very clearly delineated. This made it impossible to see those other things that I hoped to draw attention to.

Years passed. I did not regard this film as a success. I thought of it as the runt of the litter!

Then not long ago I began a survey my work. I wrote up a CV for the first time. I decided to look at *Stiletto* again, to see if it had a place in what I was beginning to think of as a body of work.

Since 1997, having made a number of other films, dance films in particular, I'd grown to revel in and trust non-story elements like rhythm. I had become more trusting too of viewers, viewers who might think and feel and inhabit the space that a film can provide.

As a result I thought I should re-edit this film to see if I could hack away all of the stuff that I now didn't feel was needed.

The first person I then showed it to was Gordon Shrigley, who luckily had a very positive reaction to it. I was very pleased about that!.

So really, this is a new film. In some ways it is the film that I started out to make, but didn't complete, way back then.

Jonathan Romney JR: What's interesting is that the original film was, I gather 25 minutes long and this is 12. Would you regard it as a reduction or a remix?

Because the curious thing is, there is the sense of a ghost of a narrative. Clearly, there is a narrative there, or the trace of a narrative, but that's clearly not what you're most interested in. It seems to be about the spaces between all these disparate moments and images, which is reflected very well in the use of the music which is all about the spaces between these staccato notes. It could almost be called 'staccato' rather than *Stiletto*, because it's about this very fragmentary set of moments.

AR: Yes. There must be several components to what you were saying.

One thing is that, as I read somewhere, we would see the world very differently if we could see the gaps between things as things in themselves.

And because when we watch a film, having watched so many films, we kind of know what to expect. We know the classical model, we know the range of possibilities. Thus it is that one can make a film like this, if you like, precisely because of the existence of all of that.

What I tried to do here is to do with that rather well known distinction between plot and story.

For instance, if we watch a film, and see someone going up Avenue Beaubourg, turn left, and, on the next cut, see them turning into Place de la République, we often say: no, you can't do that! That's all wrong! But that is a strange. Why can't you do that? It's only a film. And yet, and yet there's a part of you that rebels and the misrepresentation of reality.

A development of that, for instance, is a film has offers a complex story. But as you look at it you realise that it just doesn't add up, that somehow or another there's a fundamental story problem, a gap. The story isn't coherent. We say that it just doesn't hold water. And

so, you scorn that film. Plot of course is what you get on screen, the story the narrative implied by all that.

What I'm wondering, is whether it's possible to make a film which is all plot and no story, or only the ghost of a story, as you said.

And then, not only make do only with plot, but structure with rhythm above all else.

Thus, the music all two and threes - a rhythmic thing, a component that is intended to permeate the film, and which gives rise to action and rhythms beyond the music. That was the plan from the beginning. Rhythm is a component, a part of the expression.

There is an enigmatic quality to the film because there is this suggestion all the time of back story, but my belief is that it desirable to make films which offer suggestive plot but no story. I don't know if it quite works, if it plays like that to you, but that was why it was such a pleasure to re-edit, really to follow these ideas through relentlessly.

MP: In your previous dance films you've created literal gaps, deliberate gaps by using no image, chunks of black, something in between shots, to create, to use the editing to sculpt and to make spaces for the viewer's imagination in between. Do you see this as a film, as Jonathan says, with such deliberate omissions?

Because to me that's seems to bring out the choreographic elements in this film: the space, the rhythm of the rituals. I don't know if they were always in there, or whether hacking away as you've described your editing process, brought these to the fore.

AR: Yes. I chose dance as a subject to film because I thought I needed to get away from filming narratives, and thought dance was a suitable abstract subject.

So I made various dance films and discovered of course that there's always a narrative, however abstract the dance might be. This is human: when I watch a dance film or a piece of dance, I constantly bring in narrative of my own because I'm not neutral or passive. I'm endlessly fantasising, remembering, thinking, dreaming, not just seeing in the moment.

Overlaid on any film, at all the times, to a greater or lesser degree, is my own internal mental landscape, my imaginings, my fantasies, my history. I populate it. Everything that I see I populate. And the more abstract the work, the more space there is to populate.

I loved making dance films because in some ways I could make them overtly about what I don't see – not just because I do not and cannot see dance in the way that a dancer or choreographer can – but because part of it is always about gaps in my perception, inevitably so. I felt I had to be honest enough to include those gaps as part of the texture, the reality of what it I was offering.

But then I realised that a gap could also be a compositional element. The rhythms that you hope to create can involve them, perhaps like rests in music. I realised moreover that to film dance was no to just reveal danced rhythms, you also to creating a whole set of articulations of my own, that are part of what it is to make a film.

JR: How do you conceive a dance film? Do you imagine that the camera is to become a partner in this process or is the camera invariably drawn into the dance as it were?

AR: If you try to make a dance film, that's a question you face. You have to ask, "What is it that I'm filming? Am I here to document some physical events?" I believe that if you start there, you can't make good work.

You have to make moving images, you have to have a feeling about what that experience on a screen will be like, and forget what it is like to be there in a space, with dancers. That's not what you're after. You can't be taken up with the concrete reality. If you get caught up in the "you cannot turn left off Boulevard and be in Place de la République" form of thinking, then it seems to me all you are doing is turning on a camera and pointing it, not making a film.

I most often had the task of taking a 50-minute dance piece and making a short film out of it. It was a question of thinking about the nature of my relationship to this material and my relationship to film. After making a series of dance films I became very clear that my job was to compose.

I mean this: I had physical movement which I was to represent. I had to think of a way to film it. Editing would offer many things, but the key thing was to understand that what I had to work with was time, sound, relationship, repetition. These are the compositional tools.

It is about conceiving of an unfolding, hopefully rhythmical, form which bears a relationship with the original piece of dance but isn't (inevitably) the same thing as it is.

Now, if all those compositional possibilities are brought to bear on narrative work, then that might be interesting. At least that's been my aim, my quest. I don't know that it would work for anyone else!

JR: But it's interesting to talk about this in the context of British filmmaking because, as we know, the tradition of experimental or abstract filmmaking has been allowed to dry up, to the point of being outlawed.

And on the other hand it's very tempting if you're into that kind of world to adapt a *parti pris* towards narrative. So narrative itself becomes the danger, and it becomes the thing that we all have to rebel against.

I think there is a danger in rejecting narrative out of hand.

Given that you've moved away from narrative in a lot of your work, how do you feel about going back to this film and embracing narrative, but at the same time filleting it out?

What are your feelings about whether it's possible to make narrative film in a non-narrative way in Britain?

AR: I love narrative! Everybody loves narrative. Re-editing this film has made me very excited by narrative again: I've started to re-watch many of my favourite narrative films. It's a necessary thing – perhaps to find a way of working.

And yet, it is a problem living and working in a country which doesn't seem to have much appetite for Antonioni or the like (the narrative films I like), where it is easy to feel like you must swim against the mainstream current.

You could say that even so the avant-garde has been a rich and vital part of the history of British filmmaking – the Film-Makers' Co-op and so on – and now there is the burgeoning world of artists' film and video. I'm not sure how that will pan out, given that the mainstream film world is now so shrunken.

To what extent am I engaged with narrative? I don't know. I love stories, I like them because they open up an imaginative, emotional possibility for me as a viewer. But I see narrative, having made abstract work, having made dance films, as something rather arbitrary.

MP: One of the real strengths of the dance films that you've made is the independence between the different kinds of scores that you work with as a filmmaker: the choreographers' score, the composers' score... they don't seem to interfere with each other, they are allowed to run in parallel, as it were.

In this film, in *Stiletto*, the music feels very present to me, very subtle, very sparse. It's a lot to do with spaces. Even the individual sounds are muted or strangulated sounds. But it's integrated because you have these bits with the mother's voice calling, the boy tapping, and those percussive sounds...

I wonder if you could say a little about how you worked with Matteo Fargion on that. And also, how this works in terms of this radical re-editing. Have you been re-scoring the music as well?

AR: Not rescoring as such, no. The relationship between music and pictures is exactly the same as it was, because I didn't much change those passages. There was never any music in dialogue scenes. Given the technical difficulty of editing with final mixes, and with music in particular, it was as if I had originally edited the film so as to easily facilitate the re-edit that was to come!

The survivals in there, of dialogue, are indeed fragmentary. I like them being now almost out of context. They've become rhythmical, musical components. It is material to play with and to move up and down and move around.

The music is scored for prepared piano and prepared violin, and as you hear, very closely mic'ed. Matteo was working at that time with a violinist called Marc Sabat. They were in residence together at Schloss Solitude, in Germany – a colony of artists of all kinds, including co-incidentally Gordon Shrigley.

I wrote to Matteo and asked for some music. He asked what I wanted. Slightly strange, I replied, infused with a sense of ritual and repetition. There should be a kind of religious quality to it. In the film there are processional scenes, and long moving shots. Approaches and passages are all subject to ritual, things have to be done in certain ways. There's a sense of loneliness and obsession.

The music would be just for the boy when he's on his own, when he can control and determine everything.

Matteo came up with the idea of tiny, prepared piano and violin sounds, which were beautifully recorded with valve-amplified microphones. I'd say one of the things that's kept me keep thinking about this film over the years has been how much I've always loved the soundtrack.

I should mention Hugh Strain, the sound mixer, who I've been lucky enough to have do the mixes for most of my films. He has such a light and lovely touch. He created, by the way, the extraordinary soundtrack of the film of "The Caretaker", which is one of the most experimental soundtracks you can imagine.

So now, what I like about *Stiletto*, is that the editing prioritises the world as seen by the boy. Not even his point of view as such: the film is all his world. There simply is nothing else.

The original drama had to do with various people running businesses, suffering headaches, coping with unruly boys, chatting, and so on... It was all too complicated for a film that had to do one thing well: represent what it was like to be a boy alone.

The re-edit is to do with being very focused and attentive to details.

JR: Is the viewer going to worry about all that other stuff, that's left to the imagination?

AR: I don't think the original film enthralled anyone else, at least not me. There was only one screening, the cast and crew, and it went out on TV once late at night. The themes and concerns were not specific enough. In this new form it's more distilled. I feel it is finished now, and I feel it shows completely something very specific.

MP: Obviously the technology now makes it much more possible now to go back and revisit odd pieces of work. Do you think about your pieces as being available for reinterpretation? Open works that can be revisited, or is it a hard, painful thing to go back?

AR: That's a good question, perhaps a question about the status of film in general. You could say that this revised *Stiletto* is a kind of mash-up (so there's even a word for it!).

So how are films treated generally now? - as precious works?

For instance, you go to the cinema, and people talk throughout. People watch film on the Internet, and they Twitter whilst watching. I can watching Hitchcock while playing computer chess!

It's amazing how altered is the status of film, because you don't have to wait for the projectionist to start a screening, then feel locked into the 24-frames-a-second rate, with no replay, no pause, sitting in the dark. Nowadays that's all gone. People watch films on the bus, in their office, at home...

You can't pretend that nobody is going to press "pause" while watching your film on DVD, or take a phone call and then resume a few days later. These are the concrete circumstances in which film is consumed. In a sense, there are as many experiences of a film as there are viewers.

In the Holloway Odeon you get people having shouted conversations across the cinema during the film. That's how it is...

JR: I'd like to see that happen at festivals, because a festival is the only place in which there is an artificial, church-like atmosphere around every film - except the ones where they tell you specifically in the catalogue, "This is a fun film, it's a midnight screening, so you will be expected to have a good time and ideally sing along with the songs." I'd like to see screenings at festivals where people stand up and shout across the room at each other or break out in fights...

AR: Yes, let's bring in the Holloway Road Odeon posse!

We talked earlier about the size of the screen. That changes things a lot, because when the screen is significantly larger than you are, you are dominated by it. Shrink the screen (and it is on a small screen that this DVD will be seen): what does that do to the experience?

JR: The peculiar thing also about short film is that there is the idea that it is somehow an 'improper fit'. It is as if the ideal circumstances under which you watch a film be a perfect match for the effort that has gone into it. Therefore, it is right to watch a Hollywood blockbuster in, say, the Odeon Leicester Square, where there is the idea of a huge event appropriate to the masses of work and the million dollars which have been ploughed into the piece. You feel that you're experiencing the full budget and the full effort on an appropriate level.

Now, if you make a short film, the amount of effort which goes into even the most modest five-minute short is completely out of proportion to the length of the film and the circumstances under which it's normally watched, which is likely to be tucked away as apart of a programme of 20 shorts in a film festival. There is something kind of monstrous about the sheer intensity of labour that goes into making something which will probably seem a very fragmentary, elliptical, perhaps at best a feather-light set of images. That's the kind of freakish thing about 'the short film' as commonly experienced.

AR: That's true.

I don't know if this helps: the gothic cathedral had a role in the Middle Ages because people would go there, be awestruck by the power of the Church and the power of God. It must have seemed quite credible that if you prayed in a cathedral to the Saints, they might just intercede and relieve you of your buboes. Imagine the astonishing scale of those huge stone structures in the midst of huddled wooden shacks!

But would at the same time there was a place for the devotional miniature, the kind of thing that can be found painted in a portable triptych, or as a small-scale piece made for the home, where a different kind of relationship and experience seems desirable.

I think there something rather nice about the fact that ambition for short film-makers (in terms of image making) can't include CGI and all of that. So what you have to do is investigate other possibilities, possibilities that the large-scale entertainment film, which has to appeal broadly, isn't going to be able to do. There is a place surely for this?

For instance, one might risk more ambivalence or touch on the uncanny, find quieter rhythmical expressions that will draw some but not all in. You cannot rely on billion dollar images that induce slack-jawed amazement.

I think of short film as miniature form, something on a more personal or domestic scale. I think of what characterised Low Country renaissance painting: not large-scale commissions for churches, but small, domestic scenes, tending to be smaller pictures for smaller spaces, looked at in odd moments, moments that feel more like downtime, perhaps more privately.

When you're looking at large-scale pieces in a vast, ornate church, amid vast structures, this is inevitably a public space, and the experience probably fundamentally overwhelming. It is a theatrically produced production, involving sound, light atmosphere and smell. There's less room for a sense of yourself as a person there. The miniature does not, surely, do so well there. In the home, it is very different.

So then, how best to show short films today? This DVD release of *Stiletto* is great because this is a DVD with a single film on it. You watch it, and then you put the DVD away. You might well watch it in a quieter moment, in more personal time...

On the other hand, when you take a short film to festivals, you end up screening in programmes. I've sat through programmes of 20 films or more, at the end of which I can't remember anything about any of them. It's impossible. I think it's a nightmare, isn't it?

MP: Yes, it is.

JR: We've seen a lot of those programs!

MP: There's that experience of being bombarded, overwhelmed with leaping from one thing to another. It's quite hard, it's quite hard watching, seeing your own work in that context, and for people to tune in from one complete world to another...

JR: It's incredibly hard work: physically demanding. I feel more physically exhausted after watching a 90-minute program of shorts than I am having watched a three-hour

feature, because somehow mentally you're on an even keel. Seeing the shorts, you have to keep readjusting.

It's interesting being at festivals, watching mixed packages of shorts, especially when I've been on juries, that when I see one film that jumps out of the package it is likely to be completely abstract. You put up an argument for this one, and find that there's a real wariness from people who may be critics, perhaps, or festival directors. Often they'll say, "Well, no. It's an experiment. It's not really a film. It's an experiment." There's wariness of the thing that is not narrative, not properly packaged.

MP: With festivals, isn't there a pressure also to find award-winning films, which have a certain kind of weight. I think sometimes there's a pressure about picking out that sort of thing, a particular kind of film...

JR: Yes, so that the small, elusive, elliptical film (such as *Stiletto* has become) is a rarity and quite precious in a way.

MP: You've been showing your work in galleries recently...

AR: Yes, that's partly a response to this very problem. I don't think I can make anything that will do well in festivals, and in any case I just didn't want to make that sort of thing. I want to make this sort of thing, or else very strange, rather formal dance films...

One day it struck me that there's an audience in galleries that will watch all kinds of moving images, where they deal happily with all kinds of approaches, a very open and available space. But I don't quite know how this is going to work out; it's early days for this sort of undertaking for me.

I'm impressed by the willingness of gallery audiences to engage in a way that, increasingly, they seem unlikely to do in the cinema auditorium. I hope the kind of filmmaking we're talking about can flourish in galleries.

I know galleries have their own specific interests. They are fine art spaces, and we need to fit into that tradition. Films and videos, some at least, are already viable and valid and well-established in the gallery space. It's a good place for filmmakers.

JR: I've always felt very angry - coming from the film world, as opposed to any other world, and feeling allied to the film world rather than the art world - that this great interest in visual art, where there is veneration of adventure and challenge, in themselves very marketable commodities, that somehow film has retrenched, defining itself as everything that the art world is not.

It makes me very angry and very jealous of the art world that conceptual leaps are not just allowed but encouraged. Whereas in the film world, it seems as if there is a punitive attitude on the part of funders, on the part of audiences, on the part of critics towards anything that belongs in that other world, in that other box, which is the art box...

AR: If you take a psychoanalytical point of view, it does seem to speak of a tremendous anxiety, doesn't it? So why this strict separation? It is as if film in this country wants to

hive off part of itself. Maybe it's a cultural cringe, as Australians might suppose. It runs deep.

Despite that, a surprising number of works of incredible sublime, astonishing beauty have been made, but which it has to be said we simply don't watch much. So we hold them as things apart, paying lip service to them, screening them only under very special circumstances. Very few of us go and watch them. Old and misunderstood, and in reality, discarded. We are talking about Antonioni, Dreyer, Bresson...

It's like imagining literature without James Joyce or the Brontes even.

Anyway, that's the great thing about short films, that there is I perceive a persistent attempt to find new forms. I think people will carry on making films even if they can't see the great films of the past.

MP: Because you've worked in different areas - you've worked on feature scripts and you've made narrative films, dance films and worked for gallery, more installation based - do you feel that it's one work that you're doing, that you're seeking out different ways of showing it, or do you like the idea of working on different platforms, based on a particular environment, that you're going to show a piece of work and working back from that or are you more driven by the impulse to work with certain forms or genres?

AR: I'm not really sure, because a lot of what anyone does is done because you spot a funding opportunity. You follow these opportunities keenly, because opportunities are few and far between, and because you must, having no alternative.

For example, if there is a funding body to support narrative film-making, such the experimentally tinged BFI Production Board once did, then that's what you do and are grateful for it... and so on. Without those contexts no work can be made. And those contexts are few is any. Even so, some few people persist and manage to make new work, despite everything.

The other thing is that to know who you were 10 years ago, and so attempt a generalisation, is difficult because the memory of who you were is never trustworthy.

I don't think I've made much work, really. Enough work, perhaps, but not a vast amount, not in terms of minutes.

Think of filmmakers of the '40s, '50s and '60s. Someone like Bunuel or Hawks. How many minutes of work did they produce? Vast quantities by today's standards. Nowadays, a filmmaker might have produced, say, 20 minutes of work and yet be termed 'mid career'.

MP: It is an odd thing that what the film world that defines as 'film' and 'short film', describes really what it wants to do with them. There's the idea of a feature-length film, and the idea of a short film, which should be 10 or 12 minutes, but not 20 minutes...

JR: It's funny because in career terms, the idea is that a short film should be a step towards a feature film. I like the idea that a short film could actually be a step away from a feature film!

There this problem of bracketing, of fitting. In France they have a specific category, which is the medium length film, something like an hour long. It is still considered to be an impossible object because festivals just can't program it, where everything is defined by the feature length slot.

I like the idea that some film maker might make a career out of shorts of peculiar lengths, that can't really be shown and won't lead to any sort of commercial feature making career. That would be a ruinous undertaking, of course, but actually, you know, a very noble venture none-the-less.

MP: ... because a subject requires a certain amount of time then that's how they will work with the films that they make, rather as a step to something else. And yet with some short films, there's a sort of formula-like feel to them...

I always want to ask, when people talk about short film or ask me about short film, shorter than what?

AR: Exactly!

JR: Shorter than the one you made before!

AR: Yes!

JR: A lot shorter than the first version... Naturally you could continue making shorter and shorter versions of *Stiletto*, until you've boiled it down to just that one frame...

MP: And one chime, ping!

AR: That's very good. This is an interesting problem. Of course, films should be as long as they need to be. But there is a great weight of history, and a question of expectation. There is this something which runs about an hour and a half to two hours, which feels like an adequately complete immersion, a chance to forget about time before or time to come...

With the short film, on the other hand, you never quite get away from a sense of the now, that 'I'm watching this film'.

MP: Isn't that like when you read a poem and you're still aware that you're sitting in your chair reading it, rather than in a novel where you've lost yourself...

AR: Exactly.

MP: I like that feeling, of still remembering that sitting there watching it, having a relationship...

AR: Yes, I think that's a very strong part of what short film is, especially if you're doing the sort of work where you invite the audience to fanaticise freely and to bring to their own thoughts and speculations to bear.

For instance, in this particular film, it seemed important to me that I didn't need to necessarily include legible the dialogue about what this boy hears as he's in a corridor. I think that everybody has been in such a corridor, sometime, somewhere. Fill in that soundtrack yourself! As long as you get the lighting and the slight hesitant movements right, if you register those things, then I feel that people's memories and imagination will kick into play.

Similarly, everybody knows what it's like to feel the texture of warm wood. And if you pay attention to that kind of detail, then that means there are memories that can be activated, and the audience will be involved and alive.

Whereas if you constantly drive every scene, cut before people leave frame and so on – following the Edward Dmytryk rules - you're constantly pulling people from A to B, fearful of their being bored or losing interest.

Yes, some people find slow films boring. All I can say is that I don't mind having peripheral thoughts.

If I'm looking at a painting in the National Gallery, I don't expect not to think about anything else I'm looking at it. To insist that no, I shouldn't, and that all work must be made and organised to eliminate that possibility, would be bizarre. If you could make such painting and create such a context in the National Gallery, where I had no thoughts or feelings of my own to infuse the painting with, I would simply never go to the gallery!

The reason I go to any gallery is because of what happens when I'm standing there looking at the work. And this interesting experience isn't possible except when I'm there, standing looking and thinking and feeling.

© Adam Roberts, Jonathan Romney, Miranda Pennel, Gordon Shrigley 2009

Transcription by CastingWords