

The Interview
Jonathan Stack and Amy Hardie
15 February 2010



Jonathan Stack is best known for his remarkable documentary **The Farm**, winner of two Emmy Awards, Sundance Grand Jury Prize and nominated for an Academy Award. He started his love affair with documentaries by co-curating the Margaret Mead Film Festival in NY, before going on to make more than 25 films distributed through HBO, BBC, CH4 etc.

Amy Hardie is a documentary director and head of research in the Scottish Documentary Institute. Since her NFTS graduation film in 1990, the IDFA-award winning **Kafi's Story**, she has made more than 20 documentaries. This is her first personal film.

Jonathan Stack saw her new feature documentary, **The Edge of Dreaming** at its world premiere in open competition in the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam. This is a condensed version of their dialogue about the art of documentary, and why Scotland is producing work of such extraordinary quality.

Jonathan:

The Edge of Dreaming is not just a startlingly authentic and beautiful personal movie –it is a story in real time that takes in love, death, fear, a journey headlong into what we can know about the workings of our mind. It also has the pace and compelling narrative tension of the best fiction movies. What lies behind this film?

Amy:

Other films, great films. Emma Davie at Edinburgh College of Art is showing documentaries every Wednesday and at the Scottish Documentary Institute we are screening masterclasses most Fridays. Curating for Docspace over the last few years has allowed me to see a huge selection of the documentary greats. Including your film **The Farm**. I loved the real time story telling that lets us be present with the prisoners' shock as they hear the muscular wisdom that comes up at deep crisis: : *"Your homies your friends they are going to let you go, your partner, she is going to let you go, your children they're going to forget you. Your friends here are going to get old and they are going to die. You are alone."* I also really appreciate the art in the way you use narration: only the smallest drip of information, once we are already primed, visually and emotionally, so that it blisters our senses, as when we learn that this prison used to be a slave plantation. As an audience, we are taken into a series of intense encounters in a place that is unfamiliar to most of us – and it is a scary place. As the film progresses, we place more and more trust into you, the film-maker, to bring us through this place of despair and out into a new perspective that lets us feel our humanity.

Jonathan

It's that experience you also give the audience – that they can be there, share this journey with you as the main character. Documentaries can do that so well. I go to harsh and dark places, that's where most of my films are set, but what I try to do is to find a way of making my exchange, as a film-maker, with a person or a place, a positive one. Documentary making is an intense engagement with the world. I could even say it is my spiritual practice, finding something in the person so that I can keep that exchange a positive one.

Our films are set at opposite extremes, but I think we are both doing the same thing. One striking thing in your film is the love in your family. The story, the investigation, the suspense – that is all great, but what is so unusual is the way you look at things – you created so many beautiful images, and such intensity. You immerse the audience in a world both inside and outside your head. And the audience don't want to leave it. The audience are very receptive after the film. It's like they are hypnotised. I think you are tapping into something there, more than you know.

Amy

That's what I love about documentary making. That the frame always contains more than we can consciously and even unconsciously comprehend, much less control. So meaning can grab the audience, way beyond your own intentions for the film.

It's heightened in this film because I wanted to show what I was dreaming. I saw images and personages that didn't make so much sense to me. But I decided to be as accurate as I could be about portraying what I had seen, even if I didn't understand it myself. Audiences have then interpreted the events and images in their own ways. They fit them into their own context, which is often illuminating for me.

Jonathan

But actually your film is very tightly structured. You use music, text, reality, rough home movie images and classically composed shots to keep the audience on edge and also to bring them into a meditative state. What was the editing experience?

Amy

I worked with three editors. Ling Lee was a student at eca , whose visual fun and sharp intelligence made her an ideal collaborator. She got into NFTVS half way through the edit period. We were lucky that Colin Monie, the feature editor of The Magdalen Sisters who right now is mixing Peter Mullen's **Neds** came in at that point and brought a real visual imagination to play. Finally, we went to New York and had two intense weeks with Michael Culyba, who tightened the story line.

Jonathan

How long were you working in the edit room? Did your producers put any pressure on you?

Amy

We worked in intense bursts, over around 2 years. George Chignell, from Passion Pictures in London, and Doug Block and Lori Cheatle from Hard working Movies in New York were the producers and they were determined only on one thing: that I should make the film in my head, and not settle for anything else. They encouraged me to take as long as it needed, and constantly pushed me, both in storytelling and to verify the science content and to maximise the personal engagement. It is not what I expected from producers and much of the intensity of the film is due to their patience and intelligence.

Jonathan

Your film is clearly the result of a long process of reflection. Did the fact that you were making it about yourself contribute to that lengthy process? How did you balance the responsibility to your film and to your family?

The film went through several phases, and maybe this is true of all documentaries. My first two or three cuts were actually about responding to the material, playing off the images. You could say they were the equivalent in a fiction film of writing the script. I had to get over my extreme discomfort of being the main character in the film. I had to find ways to be both behind the camera and in front of it. Hence the use of mirrors, and the decision that the audience would see the journey through my eyes, rather than look at me whilst I was going through that emotional roller-coaster. And that led me to examine what it takes to get an audience to make an identification with a main character. At this stage my family were happy and unselfconscious about my filming: it was an extension to the usual family home movies.

Jonathan

You as the main character were facing illness and a death sentence dream. Did the process of filming itself play into a feedback loop that encouraged a positive outcome?

Amy

I was pretty urgently concerned about how to deal with this death sentence dream, both in my life and in my film. I found a model in anthropology that gave me hope. *American Anthropologist* had an article about early native American villages where each day starts with dream discussions. The aim was to enact them symbolically, acting out the fearful prediction and thereby preventing its serious occurrence.

You could say I was enacting the dream symbolically by making a film about it. The Iroquois were doing this in the seventh century. They felt that this was one of the key functions of community life. So I was using a modern medium to implement a very very old technique to change a dream, to change a bad outcome to good.

In the twenty first century, the community I 'tell' the dream to is on the one hand very private – my husband and my son, and on the other, entirely public – the film

and television audience in Europe and in the States. And there is a third community, the audiences who helped me make the film. I think this is a great privilege, to be in dialogue with these different communities. I did a lot of test screenings at this stage, with the Film Guild Cinema in the Edinburgh Filmhouse and within my creative community at Scottish Documentary Institute. Within this setting we pinned down the exact content. What was going to be in the film and what was it going to say.

There was a final stage, where we thought only about the very best way to tell this as a story. Just before this I showed it again to the family and agreed to take out shots they didn't like. I took the view that family is more valuable than any film. After this, I worked closely with the sound designer, the editor and the voice-over, working on every line, every image, to increase the intensity of the aural and visual experience for the audience. That was an interesting process. Whole scenes that had been in from the beginning were ditched as we realised we could get away with less, and less, and less. Leaving more room for the audience.

Jonathan
Once they were hooked.

Amy

Yes. But it's an easy story to hook people. I'm reading The Origin of Stories by Brian Boyd just now, who looks at play and the narrative hook as part of our evolution towards social intelligence. He shows how our brains are hard wired for stories. Because my own experience began with a prophetic dream about the death of my horse that came true, followed by another prophetic dream about my own death, I could not escape story structure for this film. It was like the universe was determined to give me a narrative hook to hang my exploration of death on.

Jonathan
It's not a simple exploration. Death is real in the film – you see it and you see how you and your kids respond to it in the moment. But it also works on an allegorical level. Not just in your reflections on death and rebirth as routine for nature, but also in the film as a whole. In fact, you could see the whole film as a much wider allegory for the damage we are doing to ourselves and our planet. There are strong visual links between the clouds and your lungs, for instance, and between brain axons and ice shapes: did you do that consciously?

Amy

I followed the visual material and I saw those links. But I think it's exciting that the film can be read that way. That is more usual in fiction film-making. Documentary celebrates the actual moment, the actual situation. And we go to documentaries with an appetite to be brought into a real place, to meet real people who are new to us. So to read a whole documentary as an allegory is unusual.

Jonathan

That's the richness of your subject matter. You are exploring the big themes – life, death, what we can know, love, family. And all in this intimate home-movie style. But then you bring in Jung and Vico and we begin to realise we are being led by someone who really knows their history of ideas. How were you able to dedicate that sort of attention to one film?

Amy

Edinburgh College of Art offered me their first PhD by practice in film. It took me off the television production line and let me take time to meander through death, dreams and how you can make them into image and sound. So they had time to percolate right into my sleeping self.

Jonathan

The cafetiere of documentaries. Really good films are like Rorschach tests: it's not so much what the audience learn about the apparent subject matter, it's what they learn about themselves. And you managed to do that whilst making a very intimate personal film, and explore the big issues and make it stunning to look at. It is cinema at its most profound. You inspired me. I am going to make my first personal film.

Amy

Tell me.

Jonathan

Its about whether I am going to have a vasectomy. I had three children with three mothers, produced by my life of disorder and order, chaos and love, and they weren't conscious choices. Now, with a man born one day apart from me, a guy who had two children with two mothers, we are going to have vasectomies – and this time make it a conscious choice. It's about manhood and virility and the world, told through my personal story. And it's a comedy.

Amy

That is fantastic. I know that that's what I want to do – find subjects in the real world that are offer themselves as stories, so I can have the pull towards pleasure that story is for me. And then structure it so that the audience can come up with their own experience and conclusions.

Jonathan

We're looking for the same thing. Maybe we'll work together on your next film.

Amy

Sounds great.