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Interview with the makers of *Trail of the Spider*

By Anja Kirschner, David Panos et al

Since we have Neil's excellent review of the film *Trail of the Spider* up on the site today I thought those interested might also want to read this interview with the film-makers. The interview was carried out July last year a week or so after the premiere. Commissioned for the *Phoenix Flame* a community zine published by Phoenix Housing Cooperative hopefully that issue will be out any day now. Thanks to Paul Helliwell for editing, commissioning and advice

In the previous issue of the *Flame* Demetra Kotouza wrote about the occupation of Tony's café on Broadway Market in 2005/6. In this issue we feature a review of the recent film *Trail of the Spider* and an interview with the makers David Panos and Anja Kirchner - relating the spectres of that campaign to the ongoing 'regeneration' of East London currently being catalysed by the London Olympics.

Trail of the Spider transposes Spaghetti Western motifs and the suppressed racial history of the American West onto the transforming landscape of East London. Questioning and re-imagining the Western's portrayal of the 'Vanishing Frontier', the film extends the metaphor to the material and psychological conditions of the present. Recreating the epic panoramas of the Western in Hackney Marshes, the Thames Gateway and Essex, on landfills, wastelands and gravel pits linked to the construction of the 2012 Olympic Park, the film allegorizes the shifting and shrinking space for collective social and political agency, self-determination and dissent in an urban reality increasingly dominated by volatile financial speculations, private interests and the Olympic gold rush.

Featuring a cast of actors and non-actors, many of whom were involved in one way or another in the Broadway Market campaign, the film weaves fiction, history and recent memory into a work that seeks no easy resolution to the conflicts of the past, present or future.

Anthony: Why a spaghetti Western? About gentrification? With a largely unknown cast?

Anja: In the Broadway Market occupation we were just getting out films from the video shop to pass time, and quite often you'd sort of go back to classics that everyone liked. And I think on a couple of occasions we were watching Westerns and then I started to watch a lot of Westerns at home as well, I'd actually never been interested in cowboy movies because I'm German I'd always watched GDR *Indianerfilme* (*East German cowboy and Indian movies but told from the perspective of the Indians*).¹ I always only wanted to hear the stories about the heroic native Americans, and I had no interest in cowboys whatsoever, and then that changed when I realised that the recurring theme in many Westerns are about land, law and displacement - things I've been interested in over my last few films. So the link to gentrification is pretty clear. I was also reading C.L.R. James during and after making *Polly II* and I started making this link between the colonial Caribbean and the westward expansion in North America - looking at race and slavery. Hence *Trail of the Spider* draws on the history of American maroon communities, the multi-racial dimension of the West and the fact that one in three cowboys were black or Mexican.

David: We also both really loved Sergio Corbucci's Spaghetti Westerns like *Django* and *Il Grande Silenzio*. Corbucci was a communist like a lot of the Italian pulp directors, but his films are also highly stylised - almost comic book representations of the West - or not really even the West. More a kind of fantasy mythological world where the clichés about honour, revenge struggle get played out. Those fantastical, aesthetic qualities in Corbucci's films spoke to our interest in non-realist, genre based film-making.

Anja: Choosing to pastiche the Western was not really a retro desire to restage B movies as ironic kitsch like Tarantino or Rodriguez. But because the Western is an interesting and very accessible vehicle to talk about certain subjects. Also, because the basic plot tropes in Westerns are so well known that you can make a shorter film that would still have the scope of a feature somehow. There is also a sense that each successive period of the Western seems to somehow work against the previous films in the genre. In that sense it's really interesting because you can get variations on the basic same story told over and over again in different historical periods, and often it's used to comment on different changes and crises in American society. So we thought that by making minor subversions we could also comment on the genre and get people to ask how this film refers to contemporary experiences. For example the film questions the figure of the loner hero or anti-hero and their ability to effect social change. Of course in the late '60s the spaghetti Western heroes were often read, as embodying a certain notion of struggle and rebellion (in the post-colonial world in particular) as the avenging angel that helps a community resist a capitalist landowner. But *Trail of the Spider* looks at what is left of this figure as a symbol of political struggle? What can still be drawn from it and what is now irrelevant?

David: The Western also allowed us to dramatise certain very real political and interpersonal dilemmas relating to struggles in Hackney without making a realist or documentary work. When you say a largely unknown cast I'm not sure what you mean. We worked with a lot of non-actors, people that we met through various experiences in Hackney like the Broadway campaign. Many people in the film are in some way drawing on their own experiences when playing their characters. I like the idea of exploring these very local situations within this epic framework, especially as many of the experiences are universalisable.

Anthony: What are the links between the film and your (and other members of the casts) involvement with the Broadway Market campaign?

Anja: Well the CafÃ© occupation happened just after we'd filmed *Polly II*. A lot of things in that film had been based on a lot of research that David had been doing with Ben Seymour into regeneration and gentrification in East London and his involvement with local political groups like Hackney Independent. A lot of that was manifested in *Polly II*. *Polly II* kind of anticipated events in a strange way - not just that its depiction of a flooded city where the poor are pushed aside preceded the class cleansing in New Orleans, but many scenes in the film like the consultation session, the squatted workers dorm or the Estate Agents speech were kind of replayed in the real world in the Broadway Market campaign. *Trail of the Spider* was made after the end of the Broadway campaign - after it lost its momentum and the group started to fall apart.

David: It's a film about fragmentation. It's about some of the difficulties of trying to organise politically in this period and about the end of the Broadway market campaign and how easy it was to go from a kind of a position of relative fraternity, trust and comradeship to a breakdown of relations between many of the people involved. It meditates on the barriers to collectivity today and how little there is to bind people together politically.

Anja: ...And also how confusing certain aspects of the campaign were - dealing with the law, all these procedural things, the legal conundrums that totally went over everyone's heads, the way Spirit was caught between all these.

David: Incidental characters in the film like the lawyers were inspired by sitting in Spirit's shop with three people with a legal background, arguing over the fine points of his court case. Meanwhile Spirit was standing there clearly just thinking 'what's going on here?', having a real conviction that because he's been a victim of injustice that the courts will automatically find a solution for him, and

wondering why people helping him legally have a more pessimistic view of what can be achieved in the courts.

Anthony: With Broadway Market, it seemed that by the end a lot of people criticised that [the legal approach] as a distraction from more direct action or organising!

David: Well, at some stage getting Spirit through his court cases is why he's still here today and hopefully able to prosecute Hackney. It was difficult to be pragmatic about the legal battles within a larger and more political framework. In some ways the kernel of the Broadway Market campaign was simply fighting for the rights of small shopkeepers to be able to buy their property. We were standing in solidarity with local people that we had a relationship with. Tony's cafe was an important place in the sense that his clientele came from a very broad social base. On the other hand the occupation and campaign also drew attention to a larger and more universal process that's wiping out peoples' livelihoods and their personal existences and focused a lot of attention and anger on the broader regenerative policies of Hackney Council and central government, and the broader social polarisation that is being played out in the area.

Anthony: but also it was quite an amazing meeting point and that's in a way the difference with the film - the new film is quite a negative portrayal of social possibility.

David: I'm not sure. I disagree strongly with Chris Jones's review. There was a sense that he wanted an upbeat portrayal of working class struggle but I feel that doesn't necessarily correspond to the reality of the moment. I think I am speaking not as a pessimistic romantic - speculating on despair - from the sidelines, but from a more informed position as having been involved with attempts to build new networks and participate in local actions. I do think that the way the characters are drawn definitely has a melancholic side to it but they're hopefully not drained of all life - rather each of them is trying to work out how to deal with changing times in their own way. The film is not a happy one but I really think, he missed the question that the film is trying to pose - He compares it to *Silenzio* where the community is brutally massacred at the end of the film. Well, in *Trail of the Spider* all the protagonists are left standing at the end. As the settlers stake their claims we wanted people to be asking, what happens next? Or how can we avoid this happening again? Strangely enough the quote from Floyd that Chris uses actually sums up the whole point of the film; if we'd been better organised then none of this would have happened! The question is what do we do? How do we found new politics? The film is meant to be read as a loop - a limbo. The key question is how can we break out of the deadlock. What can emerge from historic defeat?

Anthony: Is it a work of art or a film? Now after three screenings (the Tate, the ICA, and Chat's Palace) what has been the reaction to the film?

David: Some of these questions are false oppositions; art, not-art, cinema/art. I don't really think that art knows what it is these days - it has spent so long both culling popular culture and establishing frameworks that set it apart. But at the moment the art world and its funding structure is still a context that allows for certain latitude and experimentation, especially compared with say, the commercial film world or even film schools - even if to access that structure you need to play a particular language game and come from a particular background. But I think from the way we work it's clear that we regard it as a narrow world and one we want to go beyond.

I don't blame Chris Jones for having a bad time at the ICA - I felt kind of the same there and institutional private views are not really ideal places to look at anything! We agreed to show in that context for a variety of reasons but one was that the film was on in a Central London location for several weeks. We certainly want people to be able to see it, but we have real reservations about the institution and all it stands for at the moment. Especially now it seems to be trying to re-capture some

kind of ground up authenticity around its brand. But you do have to work within these contradictions to some extent. Also, I would rather show in public institutions rather than a private gallery and I'm not sure that screening at a social centre, a squat, or some other less compromised space would have reached a greater audience or been more accessible. We knew that we would have a free local screening as well. It's a shame that he wasn't at the Tate screening or the Chatelaine Palace event where the audience was much more local, diverse and engaged. In fact I really enjoyed the way the audiences were ignoring the decorum associated with art film events - talking, shouting out - but also it seemed that they were really engaged by the film. Those events really put the film back into a social world - I felt they really succeeded in communicating way outside of the narrow art context. I don't expect everyone liked it but the screenings had a great atmosphere and one that felt unusual for an art film.

Anja: With film you already get a much broader set of possibilities, than with many other art forms. But even with the avant garde and experimental film, participatory film work and experimental documentary you just get a set of certain patterns of working. Although we obviously aren't ignorant of these traditions, to some extent we've kind of become frustrated with what's available. *Trail of the Spider* is in some ways quite conservative formally but it feels that a lot of artists' film has become stuck in a very familiar set of gestures that no longer have any force. We're trying quite instinctually find a new form that avoids some of those clichés and expectations.

David: We've tried not to over-formalise our methods - e.g working with local people or tackling social issues. We don't make relational aesthetics type claims for our work - we never have done.

We aren't building participatory frameworks as much as working with friends and people we like. It's really only a measure of how alienated the art world is from broader social life that creates a fetish around these kind of things. It belies its class bias. But we are riding a fine line. Did we tick all the Tate's social inclusion boxes for the month of our screening? Or did we manage to reframe that space and reclaim it for a very different constituency? I'm not sure.

Anthony: What is your take on 'counterfactual' history - something which has an interesting tradition in film (Peter Watkins etc.), but perhaps is now reaching saturation point in the mainstream and art world? Has your approach to alternative history shifted between *Polly II* and *Trail of the Spider*?

Anja: It has slightly shifted, very basically, to say that, when I started to read and research things for *Polly* there were all these bits of history that were not readily available and somehow seemed to throw light on how history could have gone a different way. I was never really interested in an 'authentic' portrayal of a time past but I was curious about bringing historical events into play as things that maybe are still active or potent and could offer us different perspectives on what is going on now. -

1 see. Between Karl May and Karl Marx: The DEFA Indianerfilme (1965-1983) by Gerd Gemünden in *New German Critique*, No. 82, East German Film (Winter, 2001), pp.25-38.