

Transcription of *North South East West*

Sarah Wood interviewed by Gareth Evans

GE Dear Sarah, this is Gareth. Thank you so much for this invitation to think out loud with you together and apart about here, and elsewhere. Many thanks to Guy in Kettle's Yard, for enabling your commission and this exchange of ideas, this interview, remotely and together. Many thanks to Andrea Luka Zimmerman for enabling my footage, my images of North, South, East, and West, and also this recording.



I have four questions for you, four compass points, four ways of directing ourselves in the world. And my first question, perhaps inevitably, is about place. I'm speaking from my here to your here. You are in my elsewhere. I'm in your elsewhere. We are both together and apart on this platform and so your wonderful idea of making a film like this seems entirely suitable.

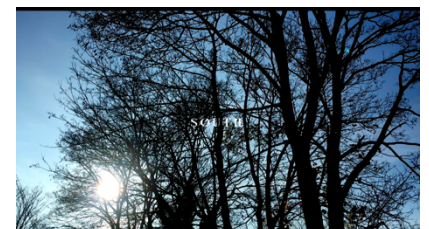
Four questions for you, one for each compass point. Please answer them however you wish, and again, thank you very much for the invitation.

My first question: it seems to me there are three kinds of place in a moving image. There is the place within the frame, the subject place shall we call it. There is the place of making, where you are, and there is the place of reception, perhaps where I am.

I wonder how you think of these three places, the triangulation within them, that I guess is the work. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

SW Hello Gareth, it's lovely to hear you in this weird, separated time. It's great to try and think with you in this odd time as well.

I always think of the first time, well, one of the first times I met Gareth, who always feels to me somebody entirely in motion, entirely in the world. It was actually in Cambridge at the Cambridge Film Festival. And all the films had been on all day. The Film Festival used to be on in July so it was a very sunny day and Gareth quite rightly hadn't sat in the cinema all afternoon – he'd been in the college gardens, wandering through Cambridge and feeling what it felt like, and all the possibilities it had. I met him in the street after he'd been out



for his afternoon while I'd been stuck in the dark of the cinema, and he said 'oh, you should put films on in the garden, the gardens are so beautiful, can you imagine?' And I knew then that I would want to be friends with Gareth because of that facility you have to translate the image into any situation, and to imagine the mix-up between cinema and location, and identity, and place – that all those things are overlapping all the time. Which is a long way of getting to your question, which is a very interesting question for this film.

As soon as lockdown happened, I became rather obsessed with timelapse footage of cities round the world. It kind of amused me, really, and also horrified me, that all the CCTV cameras that are watching us all the time, especially in Britain and across Western Europe, were still rolling. The cameras were still rolling and yet action had stopped.

There we were with these entirely cinematic images of places, the kind of places we all sort of long for in films like, well, they reminded me really of Antonioni with those empty, amazing streets where lovers would wonder through the streets, sort of navigating their own love, oblivious to the rest of the social world. And of course, Antonioni is somebody who knows to eliminate everybody else so you can see that relationship unfolding.

But here we were, looking at the world, like an Antonioni film, or sort of a CCTV version of an Antonioni film and it was horrific. Where was everybody?

And also it was unreadable. Where was everybody? Was it five o'clock in the morning and the rest of the world would kick into action at any point? But no, these were images of Paris, or Rome, or New York, or small-town America, or small-town Brazil just emptied of people. And how much you miss people when you look at those images, or I did.

So already, I was thinking, how strange it is that technology, the technology of the image, is already brought into question by the strange situation we find ourselves in. Quite apart from the sort of physical challenges we're experiencing because of Covid, and the attack on the body, it's also an attack, or enlivening, perhaps, of the way we've been framing the world for a while, and particularly through the still and moving image.

And so I began to wonder whether there was something more hopeful, whether we would re-educate ourselves in the way that we felt about the world – that the image, could once again become renewedly what it was when people first invented it, when the Lumière brothers first took it into the world, and saw it as a possibility, a way of translating actualities, of cultural

exchange if you like. That you would swap landscape after landscape for an audience so that they could feel part of the world – that the world would be brought to them and they would enter the image, as though they were part of a wider world, before travel was easily available or before the kind of speed of travel that we have now.

There's something about this stillness that we've been given, I think, that asks us to renew how we look and see and visualise our shared world. So looking at an image is slightly different at the moment. It has a longing, a sense of aspiration about it that I think it had lost for a long time.

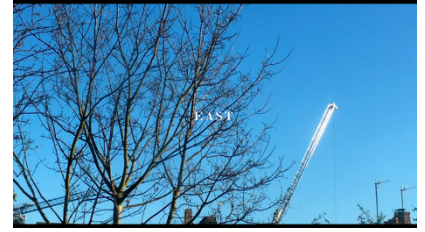
You know we've got very used to these very dulled uses of images – like images behind newsfeed, or in fact CCTV footage, or a kind of evidential use of the image, the casual use of image as a shorthand. But suddenly, looking at the world through our little screens, or through our television screens or however we've been looking at it, longing for the world, re-enlivens our excitement about the world. And I can only hope that it's slowed us down a little bit about how we look and see, about how we enter into the world. Because much as I hope that Covid is resolved for us and that we begin to be able to be social again, I hope that we also begin to understand that Covid originated because of the way we've navigated the world, because of the way we've looked at the world as something to be exploited and taken. Instead, something about this slow time asked us to slow down and listen, and hear, and be part of the world, to let something more loving take place between us and our external environments, and the realities that we usually share.

So, in the spirit of Antonioni, I wonder if these emptied cities are about love, and these emptied landscapes. And they are an invitation to return, to re-engage, but in a renewed and kinder and more hospitable way so that the frame of cinema can be something more inviting, and more hopeful.

GE My second question is about the nature of the image, about the still image and the moving image. You work with archival film; you work with many kinds of image. What do you think each kind of image – let's focus on photography and film for now – what do you think each kind of image can do in the situation in which we find ourselves? This situation of intimate distance, with strange new relationships to both place and time. How do you think about the particular qualities of these kinds of image-making?



SW That carries on very well from the last question really because I think, of course, we've lived through a revolution in the last thirty years of the digital revolution taking away from analogue technology. So the idea of process, of things taking quite a long time to make, has been elided from our understanding. So we have instantaneous image-making and now instantaneous broadcast so you could literally be streaming your experience as you record it. And I think that's exciting, and helpful and vibrant.



But there's something about thinking back to the process of photography, the early makings of photography, the early experiments – the slowness of it I suppose I'm thinking again. Because that's why in the film I particularly talk about the Daguerre picture of Boulevard du Temple in Paris. The exposure time was so long it elided anything that was moving in the picture. So you get this fantastic empty shot of a city, with no people in it but, of course, Paris was a very thriving and bustling city at the time it was taken, at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century.

I'm thinking that the process of making, the process of doing everything really, needs to slow down. We've all slowed down. In the first lockdown, you know, what did we do in a day? We worried, and had to worry about how to get a cabbage from the shop, and everything took much longer. We had to be much more self-conscious about it. And so I'm thinking that in their origins, in the origins of first still photography and then the experimentation that went into early cinema, you've got something that was vibrant, and slow, and thoughtful and about directly recording and engaging with the world.

Because we can take so much now, and record so much, and so much is just on our phones and kept around us as though we've got this sort of mnemonic pattern that's outside our own actual memories, the images somehow become more central, but less relevant. We think it's all there, all there to be seen all the time.

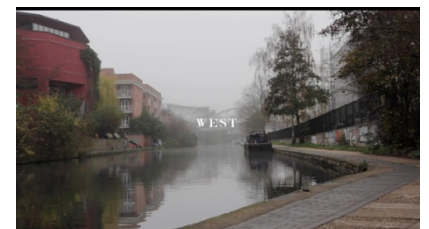
So there's something new, I think, about how we are going to manage to account for loss and absence and distance in the images we make – something we haven't been concerned with for a while. Technology's speeded us past that. But I think we all know, from our own experience of this time, some of us will have lost people, some of us will have become ill, some of us – our lives will have changed completely. We've been held apart from people we love and people we want to see. The social world is still all there, but we are held apart from each other. And so those tensions, the tensions that have been in our world for a while, the sort of distances that have meant that there's this huge chasm down the United Kingdom at the moment

about Brexit. There's something larger that's happening here that's about recognising the loss of cohesion, the loss of communication. I hope the image in its origin, in that sense of tradition that comes from a place of thought, and of process and of experimentation can play its part in reinvigorating how we imagine the social world.

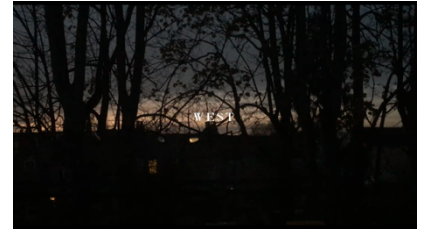
I'm also hopeful for the art situation. I think we've all longed for story and narratives to nourish us in this time. We've sat around watching mini-series on Netflix. We've watched wonderful films like the Small Axe series on BBC, which have felt like an event with the energy and the truth that they've spoken in this time. We need art. And I think the situation that art can provide – installation or exhibition – will be something that we'll long to return to. We'll long to return to be in a place, to be enlivened by the framing that art can give us. And I only hope that the framing that art will give us in the future, or photography, and that cinema will give us in the future, is something that can accommodate, from the deepest sense of what we've experienced at the moment.

You are very lucky to have had Andrea filming your footage for the interview. Andrea is entirely a person who thinks in cinema how to connect who she's filming with the audience who are watching it, so she makes community out of something that we think is cinema. She encourages participation in the way she makes, in the way she breaks down the fourth wall of the screen. We are going to need more and more cinema like that. More cinema that encourages us to look and feel part – not only with the people who are sitting next to us in the cinema, but the people we see on screen, the places we see on screen. We are going to need people with vision, to be able to think how to connect us, how to heal these sort of chasmic rifts that are crossing the world at the moment.

GE My third question is about the archival itself, about found material, and about the relation to public space. Our idea of the public is so confused, in flux, in transition now because of everything that's happened this year, and the images that you draw on are from the collective public space, even if originally made in the private sense, for a private realm, they found their way to you by some channel, through an archive or otherwise, that has made them, at least briefly, public. I wonder what you think about this relationship between the public image, the archive image, and the idea of public space now, and into the future.



SW I was very taken by something that Elizabeth Cowie wrote in her book about documentary, which was that no image means anything really, it's just the captioning that goes with it that makes it mean. So either what's spoken over it, what dialogue follows it in a narrative film, what music plays over it, what text is written on the screen. No image quintessentially means anything.



It's sort of absurd when you look at image on its own terms, if you just picked out random photographs, like Tacita Dean suggests when she has those situations where you can look through found photographs. It gives you a *feeling* from what you are looking at, but it's the same kind of feeling that you might get from your own dreams. It's something that's sort of surfacing at the back of your mind that you can't quite put your finger on.

So for me, I like to look at the image, not as something where you fix it again in a new documentary setting, but where you liberate it to find a new possibility for the image, either as a sort of site of something emotional and resonant, or as something that makes a comment on the way that the image has been framed in the first instance, or the way that the image is made now.

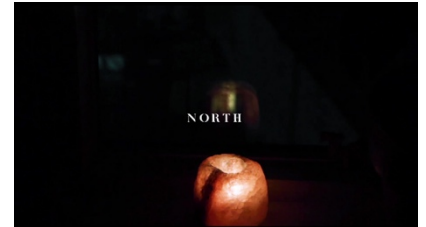
If I think about this in the context of *Here is Elsewhere*, I was curious about the difference between the way we look at images and think we understand them in a glimpse, but actually, we don't understand them, we glance onto the next thing and we are sort of guessing all the time what things mean. I was curious about the way our imaginations make up really what we see in images, or make up really what we see all the time.

I found different neuroscience experiments that prove that if you block out part of a full image, then if you map what people's minds do when they are looking at that image, you can see that they sort of guess around the block. They guess what's happening. They make the full picture come together as they pass on to the next thing. Basically that's how our minds are working all the time. They are working just ahead to predict what they see, to understand what that means very quickly so they can sort of keep us safe. So if we see half an aggressive act happening in front of us, we read that as aggressive, even though in real terms it might be something entirely different, something that isn't at all dangerous to us.

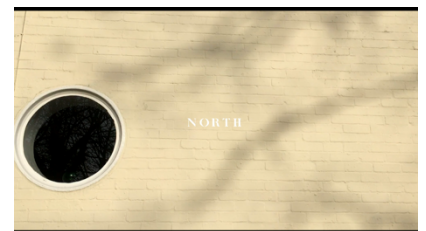
So I was curious about that, about the sense of how we glimpse. So if you look at something very precisely you get a very different sense of things than you do if you glimpse it. And I think that there is our sort of social, ethical dilemma when you are working with the archival image – to reveal as much as

possible of what that image means, or to reveal as much as possible of your own use so that we have something that's about opening up the image, opening up space. Everything to me is an opening up, an invitation for the viewer to see what's enigmatic – to understand that they are invited to take part in the construction of meaning.

GE My fourth question is about unforeseen consequences. We all know the year that we have been through; we know the world that we are in, we can't quite know the world we will find ourselves in soon, in the near term, in the mid-term, in the longer term. What we do know is that what we think might happen is only part of the story. What will happen is beyond our knowing at this point, and there will always be unforeseen consequences. What do you think those unforeseen outcomes mean for your work, and for the idea of making art, making culture at all in this time in which we find ourselves, and for the foreseeable future?



SW My strong sense when I was making the film and finding it very hard to concentrate and very hard to pin down any thought into something that was conclusive, was that why this was a difficult time for all of us, why we were feeling anxious and confused as adults and why children were finding it quite straightforward, was that it was taking us to a very primary place. We were all sort of on the backseats of our parents' cars, shouting 'are we nearly there yet? are we nearly there yet?', but in this instance we didn't have parents who knew where we were going. Nobody knows where we are going. Nobody knows what is going to happen. And so I think in the first instance something very primary was happening for us all. We were sort of regressing terribly. We wanted to know what the outcome would be. We wanted to have a short answer.



After I realised that about myself, I thought well, I need to create a form that is just a sort of gentle companionability – about creating a space where for a moment we can be together and we can just spend a bit of time thinking around the few things that we know at the moment, or the few things that we can share.

In a world where it feels like (certainly in this country) where it feels like we are leaderless, and have no parents driving the car and we are all sitting in the back seat feeling rather nervous, I think it's time for us to look to each other and think about what it is we'd like for the future.

Our future model in art is to make art a site of care, a site of sharing, a site of hospitality. Open the doors of it – as you suggested all the years ago to open up the Cambridge college gardens and put cinema in it, to open up cinema and put gardens in them! You know I think it's a time for transformation and for opening things up. I mean I'm hopeful after my extensive research into plagues for making the film that we are due a second Renaissance.

In the meantime, let's share all the good artworks we can, and carry on talking to each other, because it's brilliant. Even in this weird remote situation we find ourselves in it's been lovely to hear you.

GE Thank you so much for asking me to be part of this exchange, and I look forward very much to hearing your thoughts and responses.

