

BFI CONFERENCE JULY 2013

JULIEN TEMPLE – THE DOCUMENTARY, THE AUTEUR AND THE SPECTATOR



The British filmmaker Julien Temple provides an excellent case study for Film Studies on a number of levels;

- Since 2000 he has made a number of **documentaries** that have offered an **alternative cultural history** of Britain. These are the films that I feel offer the best scope for teachers.
- Stylistically his films have **a particular look and feel** which is very much his own. They also deal with similar themes as we will see. He can be used as an example of an auteur director and this can feed into work on the **Small Scale Research Project**.
- The **spectator responses** offered to his work can be **very complex** depending on the material used in the films. Certainly one of his films might well offer an alternative text for **Documentary and Spectatorship**.
- In terms of **editing and the use of music**, his films can be also used in teaching film form for the **Micro analysis** and also perhaps offer **inspiration** for prospective **filmmakers** in your teaching groups.

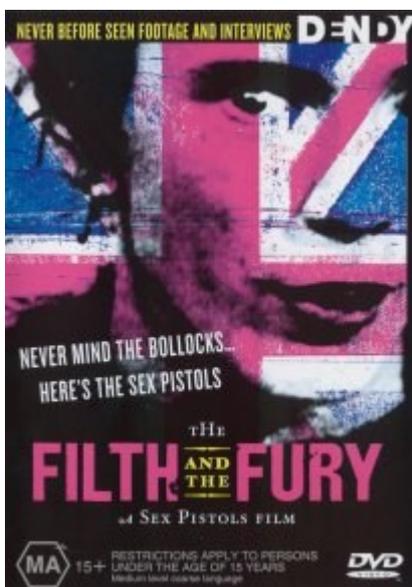
What I want to do then in this short session is to introduce (or reintroduce) you to his work and to try to offer some advice about how you might use these films in the classroom.

Brief biography

Julien Temple's name will always be synonymous with two things, **The Sex Pistols** and the film ***Absolute Beginners***. His relationship with The Pistols goes back to the mid-1970s and culminated in his film *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1979) which first established his style of filmmaking. The movie tells a highly stylized fictional account of the formation, rise and subsequent breakup of the band, from the point of view of their then-manager Malcolm McLaren. In the film, McLaren claims to create the Sex Pistols and manipulate them to the top of the music business, using them as puppets to both further his own agenda (in his own words - "chaos") and to claim the financial rewards from the various record labels the band were signed to during their brief history - EMI, A&M, Virgin, and Warner Bros. Records.

One of only three forays into fictional filmmaking came with *Absolute Beginners* (1986). This was a much hyped British musical based on Colin MaclInnes late 1950s novel. Once again it was a very stylized piece of work based on the look of the American musicals of the 1940s and 50s. However the film despite a huge amount of hype and a high profile soundtrack featuring David Bowie was critically panned and flopped at the box-office. It also led to the demise of its production company Goldcrest which had been one of the major success stories of the British film industry in the early 1980s. Interestingly the film has since received cult status.

Temple retreated to the US and worked primarily on music videos until the late 1990s. *The Filth and the Fury* (2000) is really where we pick the story up.



When Temple was interviewed by Joshua Klein for The Onion he explained why he felt the urge to return to the story of The Sex Pistols which in part outlines its importance as a cultural text

Julien Temple: Well, there are a lot of reasons. One, I guess we had spoken about it for a while—the band and myself—because we always knew there was interesting footage that hadn't been used. I suppose a certain amount [of incentive] is just having the time to do it. It's a strange project to do, in a sense, because it's very mad to make a film about the same subject in a way. Particularly about a rock band; I don't think I would do that about any other band. But you weigh those things, and things you're not meant to do are often the best things to do, you know? I always felt there was kind of a millennial aspect to The Sex Pistols. I think [critic] Greil Marcus and other people have picked up on that. It does seem a particularly good time to do it, partly because no one has actually gone further than The Sex Pistols, I don't think, in that cultural music arena. **They still challenge people.** I think in many ways—and we found this out when we tested the film in England—a lot of the younger kids thought it was a fictional piece, beyond *Spinal Tap*. They thought it was actors playing the part of deranged rock stars, or whatever they thought they were. And I think in that context, **when a generation of kids is that ignorant of their recent history, it does a good job of showing what the Pistols were standing for.** It's current and it's in the air, partly because I think nothing contemporary is as extreme or as strongly stated as what The Sex Pistols were able to do in their time, in the '70s. I think the reason to [make the film] is that their ideas are still alive: the defence of the right to be an individual, and questioning everything you read, and questioning all the information that's bombarded increasingly at you. It's more important than ever, with the opening of the floodgates of information from every corner, to stand up and say that the most important thing about us all is the fact that we're all individuals who can think for ourselves. It's a very defiant cry that's worth paying more and more attention to.

Clip One:

The opening of *The Filth and The Fury (2000)* (00.00-5.00)

- Looking at this opening how does it establish a sense of **exposition**?
- Where does it position you as a **spectator**? Elaborate on this from a **personal perspective**.
- What are the key elements of film style used here and what is their **effect**?

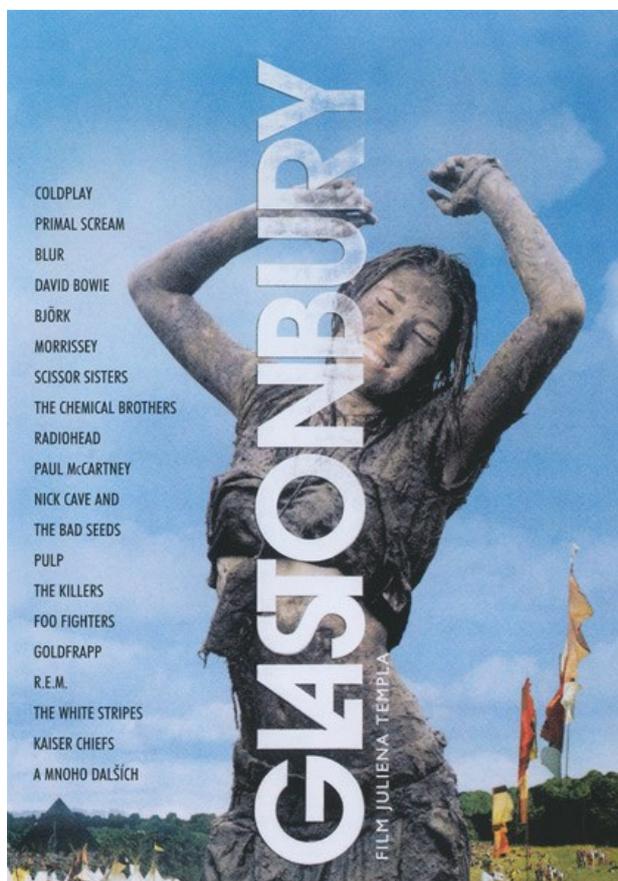
On this final question it is interesting what Temple said at the time about what sort of filmmaker he felt he was (again from The Onion interview). How does this tally with the clip?

JT: Well, I'm not a documentary maker, per se. I see this film as a movie, not as a documentary in a... **I don't know what the conventions are**, really. It's certainly not a television-styled documentary. **The editing style goes way back to when we used to make films before the Pistols.** When they were banned, we would **film stuff off television and re-edit TV shows, chop it up, and show films before their gigs.** So that **cut-up style** was very endemic to the ideas of the Pistols, I think. **I wanted to get a lot of information across in a short time**, as well, so I wanted to **not have a linear approach to it.** It was **very improvised.** We were actually one of the first people to have a video machine in the U.K., where you could tape, because we were trying to tape their TV performances, some of which are in the

film. The TV companies had [erased] some of them, as well, so the only copies that existed were the ones we taped. Spinning off from that, **I would tape lots of movies**, and in the **movie breaks I would be taping ads and news reports and weather reports**. That's **really what I mined**, and I would come across things and try them out to see how they work. It was a very cut-up kind of approach. But I think when you're trying **to recapture a sense of time and place**, that's **quite a good way to do it**, because that's the way you experienced **living in a place**. It's very random. It's not a kind **of researched archival quest**. Most documentaries have a line, and they **find material to fit that line rather than coming across material and seeing how that can change the way you're doing things**.

Clip Two *The Filth and The Fury (2000) (36.00-43.00)*

- How does this second clip capture what Temple says he is trying to achieve?
- Try to list all the different techniques he uses here?
- How many different pieces of film are 'cut' together and what is the overall effect?



His next major piece of work was *Glastonbury* (2006) made for the BBC. This took him over four years to complete. The film was to focus on both **the history and phenomenon** that was the modern day festival. What Temple also wanted to capture was the change in recent social history from the festival's early days as a free event to the modern, commercialised version. One of the major ways that he wanted to capture this was to get suitable material to span the festival's history to give the film an added sense of authenticity. He asked the general public for **amateur film footage** and was inundated.

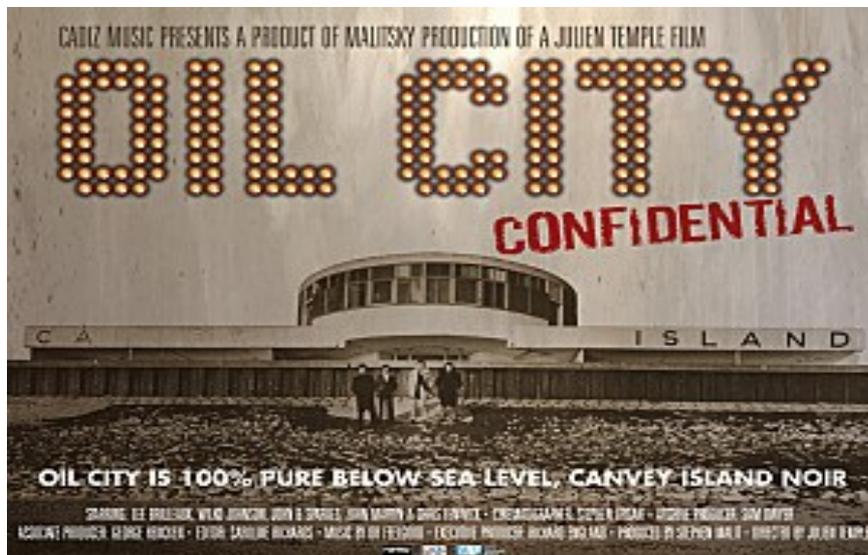
Julien Temple (in interview with Ross Purdie, Virtualfestivals.com) Going through it was ok, you just had to grin and bear it. There were miles of jugglers and stilt walkers but then **you'd find one moment that was funny or moving or historically significant** and it'd make it all worthwhile again for a while. That **took about a year** and was all about logging things properly, but that wasn't the hard bit. It was **when I got to the edit that I really freaked out**. I thought **I had all these ideas** about how to put the film together and I tried some that didn't work. There **was so much stuff** and so many options that it became a nightmare finding ways of telling the story, so I did struggle and I got quite fucked up by it actually. I just thought 'someone else should do this, I can't do it'.

Although Temple was by his own admission close to a breakdown, he did produce a fascinating testament of the chaotic Glastonbury experience.

Clip Three; **Opening of *Glastonbury* (2006) (00.00 -5.00)**

- How does this compare to the opening of *The Filth and The Fury*. Are there stylistic/thematic similarities?
- How has Temple incorporated archive and amateur footage here and what is the effect you think that he is trying to achieve?

Joe Strummer: The Future Is Unwritten (2007) and *Oil City Confidential* (2009) continues the theme of taking an **alternative view of both time and place** by focusing on two bands The Clash and Dr Feelgood.



While the Strummer film largely used the template set down by *The Filth and The Fury*, *Oil City Confidential* looked at a band that seems to have been largely forgotten. Dr Feelgood. As Temple stated at the time;

'Making a film about the Feelgoods was like Spinal Tap. It's like they never existed. There was this band that was the biggest in England for 18 months that no-one remembers. They got lost in the maelstrom of punk' (from Uncut, Oct 2008)

His film introduced the band and their music to a whole new audience and it received an extremely positive critical response on its release. It also made a star of Wilko Johnson the band's legendary guitarist (who has been sadly diagnosed with terminal cancer in recent months). It also made a star of Canvey Island where the band hailed from and it captured a very specific time (early 60s to mid-70s) in a very entertaining way.

Clip 4. ***Oil City Confidential (2008)*** – Canvey Island and the band (21.00-27.00)

- How does Temple establish a sense of time and place in this scene?
- Do what extent is this a recognisable Temple film.

Would you say the film's about the place as much as the band?

Yeah, place and time. It's not a film about the music, it's about **the people who made the music and where they came from and at that time** what was determining how they felt about things, or their options, and using music to explore the people and social/cultural landscape they came from.

Is that a theme of your work?

I try to make it like that yeah, I mean I am **a big fan of music** obviously, I don't think I could really exist without it so that is a big part of it but I don't think it's the subject, it's more like the fuel you put in the car. I studied history and I'm interested in how things turned out in certain ways and I think music is a great way of telling stories. It allows you to be more abstract. **If you use music as the organising principle it's less top down, telling you what to think, than the normal, TV, narrated documentary.** (From *Little White Lies*, July 2010)

Over the past few years, most of Temple's work has been made for television but is certainly worth looking at. Two great films on The Kinks were made for the BBC *Ray Davies - Imaginary Man* (2010) and *Dave Davies - Kinkdom Come* (2011), once again containing all of Temple's familiar signatures. His film (also made for the BBC) on the demise of Detroit as a major manufacturing centre – *Requiem for Detroit* (2009) saw a move away from his music based documentaries. Both Kinks films can be retrieved from the BUFVC if your school/college has an account. *Requiem for Detroit* can be viewed online at Documentary films for free.

London – The Modern Babylon (2012)



It does seem to be highly significant to end the presentation on Temple's most recent film, *London – The Modern Babylon* as it was released by the BFI, who also opened their vast

achieves to him (as did his regular collaborators the BBC). The film is about the huge changes in London over the past one hundred plus years, its main theme being social transformation. It traces London's recent history through Temple's usual devices of newsreel footage, contemporary interviews, songs and movies. He waded through 6000 hours of material to come up with the final version. It also employs huge amounts of music, often used contrapuntally to tell the story of change. It also weaves different sorts of film from 35mm, to super 16, VHS, HD and digital to give a patchwork like effect of the history of film.

In the accompanying notes with the DVD he says that **'[The] project was a unique opportunity to dig deep into the cultural roots and fantastic archive of our capital.** More time travel than history lesson, I wanted to portray London in full character without judgment, showing its brutality alongside its glory. **Rebellion and riots** are part of the DNA of London – but so is **redemption.**'

The film did remind me in part of Patrick Keiller's *London* and also of some of Humphrey Jennings' work (especially *Spare Time* and *Listen to Britain*). This film above all his others certainly fits the description of poetic documentary.

Clips 5 and 6 from ***London – The Modern Babylon – The Big Bang and In Paradise***

- How does each of these clips position the spectator?
- What factors might underpin this positioning?
- What criticisms might be leveled at Temple's style of filmmaking in this and his other films?

Final words

I do hope that this short presentation has been useful in terms of introducing Julien Temple's work and that it might help you in the classroom. I do think that he is a tremendously undervalued and brilliant filmmaker who manages to bring our recent cultural history alive in an entertaining and visually impressive way. A cultural history which I believe is as important as the increasingly prescribed version of our history that seem to be increasingly on offer. His films are a great starting point.



John Fitzgerald. May 2013

