



la Biennale di Venezia

Biennale College
Cinema

LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA PRESENTS A FILM BY LUKE SEOMORE AND JOSEPH BULL

BLOOD CELLS

in partnership with

GUCCI



SYNOPSIS

Adam has lived a rootless existence since his family's farm was destroyed by the Foot & Mouth epidemic of 2001. His life imploded and he abandoned his family after a single devastating incident. He has spent the years since on the nomadic fringes of British society, cycling through transitory jobs and transitory relationships, adrift from his family and past.

When his younger brother Aiden reaches out to him to announce the birth of his first child – Adam is about to become an uncle – there is an ultimatum attached: come home now, or never come home again.

Adam embarks on a journey home that is at once tortured and exhilarating, a panoramic tour through the broken and beautiful margins of Britain. As eruptions from his secret past begin to emerge, Adam attempts to break free from a self-imposed exile that must now end before it swallows him for good.



IN CONVERSATION WITH JOSEPH BULL (WRITER/DIRECTOR) AND LUKE SEOMORE (WRITER/DIRECTOR/COMPOSER)

How did the two of you get started as filmmakers?

Joseph Bull: We met at art college and started working together. Initially it was exploring photography and experimental films which we projected for musicians' live performances. This led to making more structured social documentaries and writing.

Luke Seomore: A working relationship and a good friendship happened at the same time, they are fused together now.

Can you describe your working relationship?

LS: It's quite close and intense, we are quite different personalities but we have a lot of common ideas which form out of conversations or observations. We collaborate on all aspects of the process, there is a strong sense of trust throughout. The ideas can't be traced back to either one of us, one idea often morphs into something new. A mutant of both our imaginations.

What was the original inspiration for Blood Cells?

JB: A strong memory of burning cattle on the news during the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak in the UK, the pyres against an eerie half-light. Fires stretching out across the horizon, it really felt very apocalyptic. It seemed to resonate with a lot of imagery from that period; the footage broadcast from Afghanistan and Iraq. We started to think about the emotional consequences of this event, the human cost.

We always talked about making a British road movie, a self-destructive character who wasn't violent, the only violence was internal.

LS: Those images of the Foot and Mouth crisis did haunt us. As we started to research what happened to the farmers we found a great sense of loss – both financial and emotional, but also a loss of identity. And then we started to explore the idea of how their families were affected. Which all lead to the character of Adam.

How did Barry Ward (Jimmy's Hall) contribute to the evolution of that concept?

LS: We've been close friends with Barry for a while, we shot a couple of short experiments with him. We knew he was a really talented actor, he was doing a lot of theatre but not much film. We had always loved his presence and charisma. Over two years ago we asked him to play the lead, and as the script developed his natural charm and his intensity and emotional intelligence informed how we interpreted the character. Then last year he got the Ken Loach film and our film got green lit a few months later; it's great to witness his performance on the big screen in two such contrasting films.

How did you come to work with Third films on the project?

JB: We always really respected their films and their philosophy behind filmmaking seemed very unique. Samm Haillay [Third producer] saw *Isolation* at Edinburgh Film Festival, then they saw our installation piece *Solace* which seemed to really resonant with them. We met Samm and Duane Hopkins in London and the relationship started.

How did the film develop from there?

JB: Samm was excited about the project but felt as did we that it needed lots of development in every area. Samm introduced us to Ben Young who is a writer/producer and script editor, and he really connected with the material and us. The process happened very naturally and the three of us – me, Luke, Ben – started writing and developing *Blood Cells* straight away.

LS: The original idea was going to explore the internal organs, the organic matter inside our character. Macro shots of the blood flowing through his veins. Samm liked this approach but with Ben's help we kept this abstract approach but infused it into the narrative. Ben also became a producer on the project so that was really vital to translating the script as he knew all the nuances and thematic ideas within it.

Why did you take Blood Cells to Biennale College: Cinema?

JB: The philosophy behind the College appealed to us, the process of development was interesting, working with an international team of consultants was really exciting. Looking at the year's previous films we thought they would embrace our idea; they seemed very open to experimentation.

What do you think your experience in Venice added to the film?

LS: It transformed it. The script changed a lot, it's good to explore your obsessions through film but they taught us that if you keep layering the same theme again and again it removes the contrast and resonance. Cinema depends on contrast so much and we really want the film to reflect that. The Biennale College helped us to create a script which attempted to capture a myriad of emotional states.

Can you describe the script model you developed for Blood Cells?

JB: I feel that the script format is really useful. Some of the scenes were traditionally-written dialogue scenes. But certain dialogue scenes weren't written in a traditional sense, we wanted to develop them over time as we cast the individuals and each character started to grow.



LS: There were these skeletal scenes, we had a brief explanation of where the scene should go – thematically and emotionally – but there was no set dialogue. This was where Barry was amazing in pushing the scenes in certain directions because he knew the character and story inside out and could provoke and inspire the other actors, some of whom were street cast and had never acted before.

Why were you confident that a script that was part conventional screenplay, part guided improvisation would work?

LS: Because we had done it before, we shot a short called *The First Dead Lies* and after that we made a short film for NSPCC. We also shot a test film for *Blood Cells* in 2012, so even though it was an experiment we knew it was possible. You never know one hundred percent, but the sense of pending failure shouldn't stop you trying. Didn't Capote or another writer say you learn more from your failures than your successes? I think the hybrid approach worked but those previous works helped us develop the method of combining scripted and improvisational elements.

When it came time to shoot the film, you had to reconcile the script's panoramic road movie sensibility with the constraints of a €150,000 budget. How did you manage to do that?

JB: We had strong relationships with most of the crew and we had to be constantly flexible. We wanted a really strong visual aesthetic but knew we could not dictate, we had to be prepared to adapt to environments and situations.

LS: The aesthetic and how we captured those environments was planned a lot before, so once we went into those worlds we could adapt. We talked about the idea of 'reactive cinema' – us as a

filmmaking unit adapting to environments rather than the reverse, which is how most narrative filmmaking crews operate. Also shooting a lot very quickly! Being a road movie meant that each day felt like shooting a new film – brand new locations, new characters. That constant energy helped us with momentum but it was pretty frenetic at times. Especially when we lit the giant pyre of burning cows.

What was the greatest challenge of the shoot?

JB: The time and budget restraints were always going to take their toll. So we really tried not to let that affect the actors' performances, we tried to protect them from those realities. But also on every aspect of production, trying to concentrate on each day rather than trying to think too far ahead.

LS: Limited time was difficult but we knew that would be the case before we shot. The ambition of the project didn't entirely match the budget, so it was the only way. But there were a lot of times where it flowed by in a beautiful manner because [co-producer] Tim Francis and Ben did a great job in getting every element we wanted to tell the story.

Director of Photography David Procter has shot not just Blood Cells but most of your previous films, including Isolation. How would you describe his contribution to your filmmaking?

JB: We have been working with David for five years so there is a strong short hand between us. We really respect the cinematography he brings to a film, we feel it's vital to what we present.

LS: It's like when musicians play together for years, they get to know each others' rhythms, their thoughts and approaches melt together. It feels the same with David, he knows what we want to achieve so his instinct is always what we are looking for. The way he moves with performers is fascinating, he finds visual nuances that really heighten the emotional insight to the characters.

Luke serves as both director and composer. Given that fact what would you say is relatively unique about your approach to score and soundscape?

LS: I see the story from the very first conversation – which might happen a year before the script starts. I can see each step and my score can be influenced by that. There might be some back story from the protagonist's childhood, it's never seen on screen but I can sample a sound from that memory and distort it. Then build a song on top of that sample. It's very abstract but a part of it is truthful to the character. Hopefully that will create some resonance for the audience. Sometimes we play demos to some of the actors and that helps them form ideas or moods for their scenes.

From an audience experience standpoint, how would you describe the difference between a conventional screening and the live score screenings you guys often stage for your films?

JB: Primarily it's a live event so people respond in that way, it's somewhere between watching music and watching theatre. Although cinema is a communal experience, the live music heightens that. It's the difference of listening to an album or going to watch a gig.

LS: Each time it's a one-off performance, you never see that again. Cinema is a set medium once it's cast in celluloid or digitally it doesn't change. But the live show makes it unique to that one screening.

How is Blood Cells a British film – and how is it not?

LS: The most fundamental elements are very British – British crew and cast. Travelling through British landscapes, exploring the changing elements of British society. But the filmic spirit is more European or American. We love some British filmmakers, Nicholas Roeg and Alan Clarke, but most of our influences are not in the canon of the British social realism tradition. Road movies are usually set in large countries like America or Germany. We absorbed some of those influences. But we knew we had to fragment his journey because in Britain the journey is so short. We had to subvert the idea of the road movie with a character who is at first psychologically incapable of completing a linear journey.

Beyond the tether to the 2001 Foot and Mouth epidemic and its aftermath, how do you think the film resonates for members of Adam's (and your) generation?

JB: I think the character is very recognisable, it's someone we've seen and known and is around us. Someone who has been exiled to the fringes of society.

LS: That social and economic alienation – in Adam's case triggered by the fallout from the Foot and Mouth crisis – has a wider resonance too. That across Europe and the US the economic downturn and the more deep-seated betrayal of the post war consensus since the 80s has created whole new tribes of young people with little to look forward to beyond the next passing sensation. People our age and Adam's age are the elders of that strange, unmoored normality.





BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Bull and Luke Seomore

Multi award winning filmmakers Luke Seomore and Joseph Bull explore hidden lives on the edges of British society. They often work together under the name 'Institute for Eyes', with Seomore composing original soundtracks. Together they have made features films, shorts, installations, and commercials to critical acclaim all over the world.

FILMOGRAPHY

LOST & FOUND: JIM LEE / DOCUMENTARY SHORT / 2006 / S8

15 minutes

Story of modern day nomad Jim Lee, created entirely from long-forgotten home film reels recovered from around the UK. Selected for Britdoc Festival and Edinburgh Film festival.

ISOLATION / FEATURE DOCUMENTARY / 2009 / HD /

71 Minutes

An impressionistic portrait of ex-soldier and social photographer Stuart Griffiths' life from army to homelessness, documenting his struggle to reconnect with society. Journeying across England he encounters fellow veterans revealing the emotional and physical scars of army life.

'Isolation is an important document of the experiences of ex-soldiers through the eyes of someone who knows.'

KEN LOACH

'A beautifully attuned piece of work exploring the realities and consequences of war.'

THE GUARDIAN

FORGOTTEN LANDSCAPES / 2009 / INSTALLATION / DV & S8 /

10 Minutes

'Forgotten Landscapes', an installation of film and sculpture tracing the past, present and future of the Thames Gate, exhibited at The Belfry, Bethnal Green.

SOLACE / INSTALLATION FILM / 2011 / HD /

9 Minutes

Non-narrative documentary that captures fragments of the daily inner lives of a marginalised group of Essex teenagers. Shown at the ICA, London, and Camerimage Festival 2011.

THE FIRST DEAD LIES / 2012 / HD /

8 Minutes

Short film for the UK's Channel 4 that portrays the subtle fallout from a moment when a group of British teenagers encounter a dead animal.

CAST



BARRY WARD – Adam

Born in 1980 in Dublin, Barry Ward studied at the Gaiety School of Acting and made his professional debut at 14 in Michael Winterbottom's acclaimed BBC drama *Family*. Since then he has appeared continually on stage and screen throughout the UK, Ireland and Europe. He most recently starred in Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall* and will soon appear alongside Brendan Gleeson in *Pursuit*.



JIMMY AKINGBOLA – Debo

Born to Nigerian parents in East London, Jimmy Akingbola started his career on stage in Bill Alexander's *The Nativity* and has since gone on to amass extensive credits that include starring opposite Ian McKellen in *The Cut* at the Donmar Warehouse. He is well known to UK audiences for his extensive television work.



FRANCIS MAGEE – Cormac

Francis Magee was raised in Ireland and on the Isle of Man. He spent eight years as a fisherman before becoming an actor and has since worked across film and television, including *London River*, *Cemetery Junction*, and *Game of Thrones*. He most recently appeared alongside his *Blood Cells* costar Barry Ward in Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall*.



KEITH MCERLEAN – Keith

Originally from County Donegal in Northern Ireland, Keith McErlean studied at the Gaiety School of Acting. He is best known to UK and Irish television audiences for his roles on *Raw*, *Bachelor's Walk*, and *Trivia*.



CHLOE PIRRIE – Lauren

Chloe Pirrie was born in Edinburgh in 1987. She appeared to wide acclaim in her debut film *Shell* in 2012 and has since gone on to work across film and television, including Channel 4's *Black Mirror* and the BBC's *The Game*.



HAYLEY SQUIRES – Hayley

Hayley Squires was born and raised in South London, and studied acting at Rose Bruford College. An accomplished playwright and graduate of the Royal Court Young Writers' Programme, Squires's first play, *Vera Vera Vera* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 2012 and her second, *Glitterland* premiered at the Lyric Hammersmith in 2014.

PRODUCTION & SALES

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