

ENCOUNTER WITH NICK COLLINS, FILMS AND FILM-MAKER

[for a pdf of this interview, click here.]

I first had the pleasure of talking to Nick Collins in 2012 at the Temenos event in Arcadia in Greece (mounted in order to honour Gregory Markopoulos's Eniaios project). We talked a lot about films but what's more we both shared a strong interest in Greek history, me for the classical period, him mainly, but not solely, for the mediaeval one.

[photo of Nick in kitchen]

*Then, in February 2013, being down in Sussex, I had the opportunity of seeing some of his films. In the time available, we only saw three out of the 40 or so he has made, but they still gave us plenty to discuss. The conversation focussed mainly on the logistics and technicalities involved, but it did range more widely and we touched periodically on film form and music form. We started with *Trissakia 3* (2013), the third film he has made over the years of a decaying Byzantine church in the Mani peninsula in the Peloponnese. *Trissakia 3* was made on a tiny shooting ratio of 2:1, less than most of his films, but it still contrived to cost him about £4000.*

A list of his films is given at the end. [Click here](#) to access it.

TRISSAKIA 3 (9 minutes, 16mm, silent)

[photograph from the film: hole in masonry looking out]

Nick: Charlotte [Nick's partner] took me there in 1994 and I made a film then. I went back in 2007, made another little film, and a strange thing had happened: this roof had been built, a metal structure which was obviously meant to protect it. The roof was made of corrugated iron, but in some winter gales they had got blown off leaving half the corrugated sheets still there on the ground. Last year, i.e. 2012, those sheets were all lying around the fields.

Tim: Some of them were shown in the film.

N: Yes, right at the beginning, so it is not entirely obvious what they are, but having made the third film, the whole thing seemed like an image for the Greek state in a way – here is this ancient thing that has been there for 700 years, which is gently falling apart, and which has been very strong, and this modern addition, which is meant to protect what's old, but which doesn't function properly.

T: And yet there is a pleasure in these ruins, isn't there?

N: There's even a pleasure in the metal structure in a funny sort of way.

Why Trissakia

T: The 3 *Trissakia* films, is each one better than the last?

N: I do think that each one is better than the last. The first one has a curiosity value because it is very simple, and the structure over the top isn't there. All you need is the first and the last film really. There are one or two things that have disappeared since the second one. Between the second and third, the chapel is overgrown with mould, and frescoes have gone.

T: Gone?!

In: Yes. For example, at Limeni near Areopoli, there was a beautiful chapel with the roof fallen in when we first went there in 1994. There were frescoes then and later I went back, I think in 2007. They had gone completely missing. No sign that there had ever been any frescoes there. One almost wishes you could chip them off the wall and preserve them, although alas people do and so too many churches have to be locked. Part of the interest behind the film is a slightly preservationist one, although I do like the building as it is, with its odd-shaped views that you get from the inside through the holes and gaps. There is interior and exterior lighting, which is very cinematic in a certain kind of way.

T: Opening the aperture to reveal the interior light is a lovely idea.

N: They're actually dissolves. They're the same shot using superimposition, stopping down on one exposure, and bringing the same shot up on another exposure. Just a feeling that it would be a little bit different from just stopping up. The field doesn't change quite so obviously.

T: If someone were to say to you, why don't you take a series of photographs and show them as a slideshow on the computer, would that not do just as well?

N: I don't think you ever get the sense of something being the whole from a slideshow. Robert Smithson made a slideshow of his trip to Mexico, which was very good (apart from being patronising to the Mexicans). One of the concerns is this sense of the film being a whole, of having a shape. Even though there's not a lot of movement in the film, it does cohere in a certain way. Even though they are only visible in very simple forms, tracking something through a whole day so that you get a shot at the end that is almost the same as something you get at the beginning but the light is different . . .

T: Was it made over several days, or did you spend one long day?

N: It was shot over two days, so there is a composite sort of day. The two days lasted from about 10 in the morning to 5/5.30 in the afternoon, so it's enough to track the sun round part of the church. About 400 feet on the first day, 300 feet on the second, I think. Then back to Gerolimenas for a swim in the delightful harbour.

Frescoes

T: Were you there on your own?

N: Apart from Anna Thew and Martin Lugg. Before and after the Temenos, the Mani was full of British film-makers. There was Ben Rivers and his girlfriend, there was Lucy Reynolds in Kardamyli - I didn't see her, but I knew she was there – and then Anna and Martin. I said to them that if they were coming down to the Mani, then to come and see me at the church. They rang, managed to find it, turned up, and we had dinner together on the two evenings we were there. They suggested a couple of shots, and pointed out that the style of the man with the flowing cloak, who is Theodore Stratelates, is painted in a more flowing, almost romantic style, which is slightly reflected in the camerawork, so I owe that to them. . .

I particularly like the fresco of the Last Supper. I am never going to make a narrative, but it is an image of the people round the table, as if a conversation was going on.

T: You see the parts before you see the whole, which is good. I am looking at the film and wondering whose these faces are, although I did guess it was the Last Supper before I saw the whole picture. That is engaging.

N: I hope so. I like the interplay of the looks on the faces and decided to do it before I got there.

T: Dates?

N: Some of the frescoes are certainly 13th or 14th century because there are knights in Frankish armour. John Chapman's Mani website dates them to the 13th.

T: So the chapel is part of the 'Frankokratia' you were telling me about at Temenos? ['Frankokratia' means the rule of the Franks in the Greek Peloponnese from the 13th century until the Ottomans came in the 16th century.]

N: I have a fascination with the Crusader Peloponnese, which goes back to being a child, and loving people in armour racing around on horseback, which was supplemented by studying that period as part of my degree. But the church itself is purely Byzantine I'm fairly sure.

[photograph of the books on the Crusades]

T: So, the frescoes are 13th or 14th century.

N: Actually, I think the one of the Last Supper was repainted over the top of what was there before. It was Anna who spotted that. When I looked at it, it was in better condition than all the others. In one fresco, I like the hands of the Virgin and the eyes. I don't know whether you spotted it, but when you look up through that hole in the apse, there are just these two eyes. You have the hands blessing, and the eyes, but the body has gone.

T: Hands are so expressive of everything.

N: I really like hands as well. Quite early on I made a film of a fantasy story by Joseph Addison, about sailors who go to an island where it is so cold their words freeze in the air! For the film, I dressed people up in costumes, which is the only time I've ever done that, and shot various pieces to do with the story, but the only bits I liked were the bits showing the 18th-century cuffs and their hands, while the rest felt phoney.

T: What's that film?

N: It's called *Passage*, made in 1982-3. It's my post-Straubian costume drama. I was very taken with Straub-Huillet at that stage. I do still like their films . . .

T: *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*?

N: Yes. And *History Lessons* I liked a lot, which is a Brecht play. With *Passage* I had a little go at something that was in shouting distance of a narrative or anti-narrative type of cinema, but I couldn't really do it. Actually, people dressed up in costumes felt entirely fake. I learnt to be much more interested in places. There is something about hands which are always live to the person who is their owner.

Documentary?

T: Was motivation for the *Trissakia* films documentary? Or a sort of pilgrimage?

N: There's a bit of documentary in *Trissakia 3*. There is also a bit of having done films at that place twice before, and not feeling that either quite cut it. And it's also simply liking the building. It's a combination of these beautiful frescoes, and the decrepitude, and the modern structure as well being imposed over the top. Also this is the fifth little short film I've made in and around the Messenian Gulf: previously there was a Mycenaean one, an ancient Greek one, a Roman one and a modern one. [*Tholos* (2007); *Temple of Apollo* (2011); *Loutra/Baths* (2010); *Square and Mountain* (2011)] They're all to do with the site really. I lacked a mediaeval one which gave me the push to go there and do this one again, feeling in part that that would make a set.

T: Would you ever think of putting the three *Trissakia* films together as a narrative?

N: As a group? Yes, I might well show them as a group at some stage. I think of *Trissakia 3* as very straightforward and simple, although perhaps it is less simple than might at first appear.

T: There is some time-lapse in it. Is there more there than I have noticed?

N: Just the one shot, that's all.

Cutting

T: The question poses itself, especially with the opening bits: how would you cut that section? Do you make a judgement on how the viewer sees it as the right length of time?

N: That particular bit was quite a short bit of time-lapse, because I realised that I wasn't going to be able to do a huge amount in the two days available. It was a question of making the film without much time-lapse, and maybe it didn't need it anyway. There was this one little bit of really nice time-lapse and it was a question of bringing the shots around it to the right length in relation to it rather than the other way round.

T: So it's not a mathematical calculation? You never think, Oh, it must be 5 feet?

N: No. I have a feeling about shots being roughly the same length. There'll be passages where the shots are roughly the same length, but then you'll think, actually everything is the same length, so let's change it: a shorter bit, or a longer bit, or a bit that goes outside, or something that follows a bit of action. That patch of light you see in the time-lapse moves. In a way that's the story of the film in large part. It's that one made by the hole in the ceiling which then goes up the wall until it illuminates the

carvings on the screen. That was one of the things: if I had had longer, I could have investigated the movement of that patch of light in a much more thoroughgoing way in order to see quite exactly where it ends up. But there wasn't time unfortunately.

[photograph of sun on carving]

T: So that is *Trissakia 4*?

N: I don't think I'll go back there. I think I've done it now to my satisfaction. In 10 years' time, maybe – if there's any celluloid film left!

We then watched By the Woodyard, the middle section of Three Short Films, made in 1998/9. It shows a timber yard at Newhaven, not far from where Nick lives, extracting from this unpromising site a striking series of effects of light on surfaces both natural and artificial, especially chain-link fencing.

BY THE WOODYARD (8 minutes, 16mm, sound)

[Woodyard chainlink fencing image]

Sound/tripod/music

T: Tell me about the sound.

N: It's all ambient sound. There's probably more there than you can hear as a result of the projector going.

T: I think Brakhage used to call these kinds of screening, with the projector in the room, 'thunder and lightning'. Such a good description. But I realise that was ambient sound, and that's important. Was that recorded afterwards?

N: I usually do do the sound a bit after because however much you like to think it gives a bit more significance to the image, there is less time to do it. Light readings and things like that, camera positions, all take time, so walking round afterwards with a pair of headphones, a microphone and a recorder lets you do quite a lot in quite a short time. But it's quite layered. There's 3 or 4 tracks going on. Birdsong dovetailing with industrial sound. An odd bit of this or that. Voices laid on top. There's a bloke that says, "It's only 1 foot out," to do with the placement of some baulk of timber, quite near where you hear the ferry leaving for France. You get those little shocks of the blast of the horn. The first one is quite loud, and the second one is really loud.

T: So really it should be seen in the cinema with the projector sound contained in the projector box.

N: Yes but with the silent films, I quite like having the projector in the room because it takes the edge off the silence without there being anything in particular.

T: Do you use a tripod all the time?

N: Quite often not.

T: Then you've got a very steady hand.

N: Yes. The zip pans are hand-held.

T: I was going to say they jump out at you.

N: Yes. Sometimes that's an A-B-A thing, the bit where it's slow, then there's a bit in the middle speeded up, then it goes back to being slow again.

T: A musical structure.

N: In this particular case, yes. You can go on being slow and after a while people think, is it going to go on like this? So, that's time to do something slightly different.

T: So, are you conscious of musical structure?

N: Yes, very much. I am very keen on music, and I play the flute. There's that Haydn Opus 54 string quartet (no. 2 in C) where in the finale it starts adagio, which is slow – and that's unusual for a last movement – then after quite a time there's a brief Presto section, i.e. quick, and then the movement returns to the Adagio to end on.

T: And that's something Beethoven learned – from Haydn and from others - the juxtaposition of mood and pace and dynamic. It adds real excitement, I think. Narrative is the wrong word to use about music but doing that really keeps you listening.

N: Nor does it have to be in sonata form. You have it in Stravinsky as well, for example in 'The Rite of Spring', there's the oily bassoon solo at the opening, and then the big chord stuff. Just through playing lots of music and listening as well I'm very conscious of music.

T: With pre-20th-century music, as far as structure goes, I have a sense of there being a beginning, a middle and an end. You are led into the piece, then there's a development, an exposition, what have you. And that's another thing about music: why do I know this piece is coming to an end? I can sense it but I don't understand about the way keys and harmony work. Yet with modern pieces it can be the case that you don't know where it's going to end and that is very important.

N: Very significant.

T: Haydn, of course, being a leg-puller, can end a piece when you're not expecting it. I think with modernist art, you can get lost and ask yourself where is this all going? But that is deliberate. With Brakhage for example you plunge into his films and then plunge out, as if to create a notion of timelessness.

N: They are not always rounded off, are they?

T: I have wondered if it is a feature of Englishness to be a bit dissatisfied with that. English poetry is always structured, it's not like that American open poetics.

N: Well, let's say European-ness. I've heard the same thing really that openness, open horizons, the scale of things, is American. The Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam – or somebody – has said how the most simple form of completeness is an O. I do feel the urge that in some way the beginning links up to the end.

T: If you are European, you've been brought up in that structured culture of European poetry, but the Americans, not necessarily having that, they throw the rulebook out.

N: And that creates a very discursive sort of tone, conversational you might almost say.

Big films, small films

T: Do you think all this has a bearing on your wish to make short films? The Americans of course, being American, want to make the 3-hour statement, or with Markopoulos' *Eniaios* the 80-hour statement. Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*. Snow's *Central Region*, and so on. Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* was made into the 4½-hour *Art of Vision*, some colossally big statement.

N: Works like Mahler symphonies are like being at sea rather than being on a small lake where you can see both shores. Once you are at sea, I often feel with big-scale things like that, I've lost my way, I can't follow it. In a way, there is a real pleasure or satisfaction in forms that you can hold on to mentally, rather than setting out to swim the Atlantic, and then not quite knowing how far you've got.

T: That's more a problem I have with Harrison Birtwistle who produces an astonishing array of sounds but I get lost. Take 'Earth Dances'. Birtwistle says there is a structure, but I just can't get hold of it.

N: I can't with Boulez either. I tend to like small forms. I like Poulenc's song cycles very much. Intensive imagery, the way he uses harmony. I also think I've got a short attention span! My friend the film-maker Nicky Hamlyn, for example, will listen to a Morton Feldman string quartet for hours, and probably really be listening all the way through, but I tend to be wandering off. As a viewer, I'm willing to trust reasonably long experiences and try to concentrate, with many failings along the way. But I think as far as doing it myself . . . It seems to take quite a long time to make a film, and I even get down to thinking, Do I want to cut one

frame off that shot or not? If I was working on a very big scale it would become a very different thing and those considerations would become less acute.

T: So in *By the Woodyard* you have those lovely time-lapse things, which largely determine where they begin and where they end, do they not?

N: They can be determined by how far the shadow gets across, or there's this possibility that the shadow can move halfway and then you can take a lot of frames very quickly so that it stops. It becomes something very temporal and then something slightly less temporal, although that's not quite the right way of putting it.

There's a lot of standing there because I didn't have a time-lapse motor in those days. I had a metronome in my back pocket which beeped and I set it to 60 . . .

T: Every 60 seconds?

N: No. Every 6th beep, or is it every 10th, I can't remember, anyway let's say 60 beeps a minute, so that's a beep a second. Whenever it sounded the 6th beep, or whatever, I took a frame. The bit where I'm hurling myself round in circles really came out of the fact it got so boring. Every shot took about 1¼ hours, and there's quite a lot that didn't get into the film. I devise these games like how far can you walk away from the camera and get back in time to do the next frame. Or jumping up and down!

Cost

T: Can you remember how much *By the Woodyard* cost?

N: It's one of three short films. The first, *Room with Two Mirrors*, which I made here in this house, is about 4½ minutes. *Woodyard* is about 7 or 8 min, and then the third one, *Midday Shade*, is about 7½. I had a grant from the Arts Council for £3000, and I supplemented it by about £1000 so it's about £4000 for three films as opposed to *Trissakia 3* which cost nearly £4000 for one.

Finally we came to Mimente, a film of a river in the Cévennes in the south of France where Nick and his family take regular holidays.

MIMENTE (10 minutes, 16mm, silent)

[Mimente postcard image]

Music and film (continued)

T: Since we're talking about music and film, let's get one question out of the way: have you ever added a music soundtrack to any of your films?

N: I suppose I take the usual line of accepting diegetic music, which I take to be music which takes place within the action, but rejecting music laid over, just on the soundtrack. Except that I'm fairly suspicious of the use of music at all, feeling that it washes the viewer along all too easily, over all the difficulties, and often all the points of interest, in the filmmaking. One of my discoveries since I stopped making sound films, is silent visual rhythm, so beautifully explored in some of Brakhage's hand-painted films. I feel that I haven't explored that nearly enough, yet. Despite that, I have used music on one or two occasions, most recently in a film called *Where the Arun meets the Sea* (2009), which was a commission. I used Purcell's setting of 'They that go down to the sea in ships' . . .

T: Oh yes, I know, in The Psalms. 'And stagger like a drunken man' and the music sort of staggers.

N: That's the one! Anyway you can see that I don't always abide by my own rules! But what I'm in favour of really is a musical use of natural sounds, which I hope I've achieved in *Woodyard* and elsewhere, where I've made sound films.

T: Do we perceive a sequence of images like we perceive music in the brain?

N: You do get a bit in the middle of the film which is different, in a different key, and where the rhythm is different in all sorts of ways. I suppose with film there's no precise equivalent to musical harmony really. There's tonality of shots, about lightness and colour, but it is very different. But I still think when it's a question of doing something different in the middle or wherever, people do perceive that in a slightly similar way to listening to music. They might perceive the sounds differently in the brain but certainly in a formal sense they experience it like music.

The evanescence of places

T: The first two films you showed me are of sites in the process of disappearing: the woodyard has gone, and the chapel at Trissakia will disappear in due course, although it will take time. The river however goes on forever.

N: The river goes on, but every year it's different. The deepest bit of the pool is about twice the height of this room, but in the winter it is three times as high. It comes down with great big boulders which move around. One or two the size of this room stay put but everything else moves around. The shape of the pool changes completely.

T: Was *Across the Valley* done there?

N: The site of *Mimente* is straight down the hill from *Across the Valley*, and the film was made a couple of years later. *Across the Valley* was finished in 2006 and I started *Mimente* the year after. I just started filming things. I do like filming places I'm familiar with. I have rarely gone somewhere specifically to film that I didn't know first. I had a bit of stock left over from the earlier film, so I started things like that edge of rock, filming it at different speeds so that the reflection on the water became almost like writing.

Sunlight and darkness

T: Have you ever made a film that is not in bright sunlight?

N: Good question, but the answer is yes, although I do like sunlight. I have made one little film called *Winter Woods*, which does have sunlight, but the sun came out only once, so it's mostly shot in subdued light. *Dark Garden*, which I made in 2011, is all shot in the garden here at night. And there are others: *Passage* is shot in dull light, and *Sanday* too, that was in the Orkneys.

T: I think that one of the compliments you can give to a work of art is that it makes you perceive things anew. I like light on rivers, but those shots of the light running over the gravel in a geometrical way made me think that I have never seen light on a river do that before. That's terrific.

N: There are some bits at the end, with single frames, and every time a patch of light catches the water under the trees, it makes a random pattern which is sinister . . . It has a certain darkness, and it develops a certain darkness as it goes on which is then dispelled when people come on the scene.

T: I have no sense of darkness in any non-literal way. Do people see the films as a metaphor? Actually you've got one metaphor, namely of the Trissakia chapel being the state of Greece . . . the state of empire . . . the state of history. But in *Mimente* I thought there was a particular objective pleasure in the world around us. That is true of *By the Woodyard* as well, which is clever because it's not the place you expect to see that kind of the beauty.

N: No, it's an industrial landscape. I think there is a vein of darkness there, particularly in *Trissakia 3*. There is what I call the 'screaming saint' after you get the face of Christ: there is an image that you almost feel is sinking back into the plaster. Is he burning? Or maybe not because he's got a halo.

T: This is the Last Supper fresco?

N: No, before that, there is a particular saint – whoever it is. Apart from him, it's not an uncheerful film. With *By the Woodyard* there is something about the way the shadows sink into the ground. You get these V-shaped shadows spreading, almost like black liquid. Sometimes with places I look at them, and there's a vein of some kind in there, whatever you call it, a vein of darkness.

T: Coming back to music, that's an astonishing thing about the way the minor key creates a different mood. I don't personally sense that with films, but you think it is there a bit, do you?

N: I think it is there in some of my films. I certainly think it goes beyond being delightful all way through. There is a violent bit near the end, where the water is filmed very close up, a sort of violence and darkness.

T: And yet there are people at the end.

N: And they change the mood.

T: Is that last shot of you?

N: Yes. And after that there is the river at dusk.

T: The ending made me think of Bruce Baillie's *Castro Street*. Baillie said of the railway worker who comes at the end, "He's the essential image of consciousness" and I thought with your film there's Nick Collins, the essential image of consciousness, right at the end. I know it's the penultimate shot, but I liked very much the way you swim away up into the top of the frame – I knew it was the end, and then those grace notes follow of the light at dusk. Lovely.

N: The camera was in 5 feet of water. The tripod head was just above the surface. I was trying not to knock the camera over, although not having electronics in it, it might have survived if it had been put out to dry. Charlotte swam out and started the camera with dry hands, not far from the shore. The camera was almost sitting on the surface of the water. What I really wanted to capture was the moment that as you swim and the sun is going down, you get these black ripples which spread out in front of you because the sun is on the other side of each ripple. It would be nice to have a Bolex strapped to a helmet but it's not been invented!

[Filmography:](#)

After the music ... (1979)

Cornish Winter Reeds and Skies (1980/90)

Journeys (1981)

Time at Night (1982/3)

Passage (1982/3)

Self-portrait (1983)

Deptford Creek (1984)

Looking in and out (A Winter Diary) (1984/6)

Valletta (1985)

Winter into Spring (1985)

Sanday (1986/8)

Views From A City (1991/3)

Bureau de Change (with Rose Finn-Kelcey) (1992)

Steam Installation (with Rose Finn-Kelcey) (1993)

Trissakia 1 (1994)

Tessa's Table (with Simon Wells) (1995/6)

Borough Market (1995/6)

Variations (1997)

Three Short Films (Room with Two Mirrors; By the Woodyard; Midday Shade) (1998/9)

Tidemills (2003)

Winter Woods (2005)

Three Silent Films (Early Morning; Bathroom Mirror; Cat & Flyscreen) (2005)

Across the Valley (2006)

Loops (twin-screen) (2006 and 2007)

Trissakia 2 (2007)

Mimente (2008)

Four silent films (Frost Table, Tholos, Jasmine Tea, Garden) (2009)

Where the Arun Meets the Sea (2009)

Loutra: Baths (2010)

Square and Mountain (2010)

Dark Garden (2011)

Temple of Apollo, An Afternoon, At Pont du Tarn (2012)

Trissakia 3 (2013)

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Documents

- 'A Space for Reflection: the films of Nick Collins' by AL Rees in 'Sequence' no. 2 (Autumn 2011)
- interview with Nick Collins by Adam Pugh about *Mimente* and *Across the Valley* in 'Common Ground' (Aurora, Norwich 2009)

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[photo of Nick's poetry books]