

BRIDGING THE GAP

Richard Dunkley is a photographer who makes films and brings the same high standard of aesthetic, technical and commercial quality to both. Here he explains how.

Essentially I still earn my living from photography, in the form of print sales. I sell black-and-white work through two galleries and directly to mainly corporate clients and to some collectors. This is my main revenue stream. This material is really what I call 'Observations'; that which sells is personal, negative-based black-and-white images from years of travelling the world on commercial jobs. I had a tendency to arrive early and leave late



*A scene from **The Silver Footprint***

to try and exercise my 'inner Cartier-Bresson'. So my active involvement with photography is in trying to add to this body of work. I am still very involved with photography, but in a very personal way. At a certain age it is better to do what you really want to do, if you can get away with it.

I've been a commercial photographer for a long time. I was based in New York for 12 years. I'd given up shooting fashion, which I was no longer passionate about, and was working in a far more reportage way within portraiture when I came back to London. It was on coming back, however, that I started to get this desire to move on creatively.

I started off in film and studied at The London Film School in the 1970s. I've always joked with friends that I'd been 'hijacked' by photography, because film has always been my passion and my major interest. I became obsessed with films and maybe I was delusional in thinking that I could express my obsession through photography. Most photographers start off pretty idealistic I think, before they become embroiled in the commercial needs of a client. When I started, commercial photography could give you a pretty good living; although, I do not think that that is the case for many any more.

Filmmaking seemed to be a very inaccessible world, whereas photography seemed to be far more achievable. I started shooting record covers and things like that when I was at film school, but I definitely wasn't ready to control large groups of people on set, or deal with scripts. However, when I got back from New York, around 2000, I just decided to do what I really wanted to do and, thanks to my very switched-on assistants, I got into digital photography very early on. I'd never turned on a computer in my life, but they seduced me into it. It also occurred to me that the way forward for an experienced, picky photographer to make a living was in stock photography. Stock is very different today than it was then. In those days you were given a big budget to go off with for a few weeks to create beautiful pictures, but the whole structure of shooting stock has now changed completely. You now have to invest vast amounts of your own money to have any chance of getting

pictures accepted.

How I finally ended up going back into filmmaking was by having the good fortune to meet a young DoP called Charlie Jones, about four years ago. We got on like a house on fire and started making short films together before going on to make a documentary. Like my assistants in the early digital days, I learnt a lot from Charlie. It was like going back to school. I didn't return to filmmaking because of the ease of using the new cameras. Like many people I've always had a couple of feature ideas and for a number of years I have worked on some concepts, one of which dated back to when I was at film school. So I didn't start my journey back into filmmaking with a camera; I started it with a pen. It was more a question of writing with the delusional desire to get a feature film made. So I went off and attended a variety of different kinds of scriptwriting courses. The feature film is a thread that runs through my filmmaking journey, but I also started to make shorts and come up with ideas for them. I've got to keep shooting because I can't go through the process of writing, writing, writing and refining a script, because that process can go on for years.

I've always maintained that, as a photographer, you have to keep shooting, otherwise you just lose it. You can't just sit around waiting for the next big job and expect to be sharp. For me, filmmaking is the same. Some of the shorts were self-funded, but I shoot a lot of book covers, so I started suggesting to publishing art directors that I could make a short film at the same time as shooting the covers, and they were really receptive to this. It was frenetic shooting to do both, but I always work with a cameraman to shoot film. Despite the fact that I have been a photographer my whole life, I don't think I'm good enough to be a cameraman, even for basic shooting. I think you need a lot of specific skills to shoot film. These guys have a lot of cinematic language available to them to make film look interesting.

I think that in directing things my visual sense helps me enormously when working with a cinematographer, and I do not have the time or inclination to become a master Steadicam operator,



Scenes from *The Silver Footprint* featuring photographic printer Robin Bell



for example; I see that as a separate passion. When I decided to make documentaries my inspiration was the Maysles brothers, who I worship. The two of them worked together with very small teams and produced some of the best documentaries ever made. For me, documentaries are about being unobtrusive, and I think that's why the Maysles were so brilliant, because people forgot that they were even there. I think that their work is more relevant today than it probably has been for a very long time. It's a textbook on how to make a documentary. If anybody asked me how to make a documentary I would say: "Buy a box set of their stuff and a book on how they made

them, and that would be like going to film school."

The first documentary I made featured the classical musician Alison Balsom. In creating that I developed a formula as to how I wanted to make personality-led documentaries. The film, entitled *A Musical Life*, was an incredible exercise. I've had thousands and thousands of emails from people wanting to see it, and more than 100,000 have viewed the trailer. Unfortunately, I am not allowed to make the film available on general release at the moment, and it can only be shown at film festivals. Because of this I wanted to make another personality-led film quickly; one that I could show. I was at a film festival where I saw a

Above: A scene from *The Silver Footprint*. Right: Richard Dunkley (seated) on set





Photographic printer Robin Bell in his studio

documentary about a couple of students going to see an old cinema in Italy, where a grumpy old projectionist had an incredible stock of films from the 1940s and '50s; all gathering dust. He had the history of film in these canisters and the students wanted to log and archive the material, but he wasn't interested. I said to Charlie, who had come with me, that I knew a place just like that, where the history of photography was stored: photographic printer Robin Bell's studio. Robin's place is not untidy like the projectionist's, but it gave me the idea for my next documentary. So we went to see him the next day and told him that we wanted to make a film about him. Charlie just started shooting and, being a guy in his 20s, became obsessed with the darkroom equipment, which he had never seen before. The three of us realised that we had something viable and, a couple of weeks later, started shooting the film.

Once the Robin Bell film, *The Silver Footprint*, was made, I entered into an extremely interesting part of the process of getting the film seen. I had to learn the business of trying to make people aware of the film, with no money and no budget. I threw myself into the internet: YouTube, viralling etc. What I found is, if you scour enough posts, there are a lot of seminars and educational events taking place every day at which you can pitch up to learn a few marketing tricks. It was astonishing how much I could learn in just one evening about online selling and marketing.

I was also lucky, in that I met an old friend who is a film distributor. He looked at the final cut of the film and said: "It's very nice, but totally unsaleable." He advised me on how to break the film up. He said that what it needed was a lot of extras for the photographic enthusiasts to put on a DVD. The principle of documentary is, I think, to get somebody interested in something they are not ordinarily interested in. I think that goes for all documentaries. However, the key word in reference to the film about Robin is 'niche'. A niche film guarantees an audience; and now the people in that audience are finding it. By mistake I left a cut of the film unlocked on Vimeo. Somebody found it and recommended it to others. Suddenly, 2,000

people were watching the full-length film without paying, but it generated a lot of interest.

I think that although I still earn my living primarily as a photographer, my passion is in film. I now feel that I can do it, and I believe the more short films I make, the more credibility I will have when it comes to making a feature film. I wouldn't want to be a stills-dependent photographer today. If you take a still what are your options? You might get it published in a magazine. It's very, very vaguely possible that you might sell it to be used in an ad, or you might put it in a stock library where it will get lost forever; whereas, if you make a film, you have television channels all over the world looking for content. You can sell it as a DVD, you have educational establishments looking for content, or you can give seminars about how you made it. There is a hell of a life to a piece of film that a still today does not have.

It's hard to self-finance, but if there is any way you can, you should. With the help of enthusiastic collaborators, documentaries and short films can be made this way. Then you have something to sell. There are hundreds of people running around with ideas on paper, but how many pieces of paper can the decision makers read? However, if you've got something shot and tangible, then you are in the game. If you want to be a filmmaker you need an idea and a pen; it is not enough to put a camera on a tripod and press 'movie'. Your first tool should not be Final Cut Pro, it should be Final Draft. You've got to write it because you are going to have to sell it to people. A photographer can have an idea of how he or she wants a film to look: the textures, the light, the composition and the colour saturation. But that is not a film. A film has to have a narrative; a story.

www.richarddunkley-photography.com
You can see the trailer for *The Silver Footprint* at www.hungryeyemagazine.com on our *Hungry Eye* TV channel.