

ARTISTS AT WORK: DUNCAN CAMPBELL

Film-maker Duncan Campbell speaks to Tate curator Stuart Comer about his new film, *Make it new John*, a combination of documentary and fiction chronicling the automaker John DeLorean.

Duncan Campbell interviewed by Stuart Comer
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Duncan Campbell's new film Make it new John (2009) looks at John DeLorean and his famously botched series of flamboyant sports cars, which the business produced in a factory in sectarian West Belfast. The film tracks the hype and eventual decline that surrounded the cars, as Margaret Thatcher's government revoked support of the business and DeLorean racked up ever higher expense accounts. In the interview below, Stuart Comer, curator of film at Tate Modern, London, speaks with Campbell about Make it new John and his earlier body of work.

Stuart Comer: *In your films Bernadette (2008) and Make it new John you read a place, Northern Ireland, and its politics through specific personae and the documents that serve to represent them. These documents take on a performative role as you wrest them from their traditional media and archival matrix to re-imagine the histories and legacies of the Northern Irish activist and MP Bernadette Devlin and the automaker John DeLorean. Can you tell me more about how your films reactivate these documents to open up the space between the actual and the imaginary?*

Duncan Campbell: Both films are an attempt to understand the past through the documents - archival material etc. - that you mention. I start from the idea that the imaginary is already inherent in this material because of the way that it processes or mediates the past. If you accept this then anything approaching 'the actual' is very hard to achieve. That is not to say that *Bernadette* and *Make it new John* are anti-historical. For a start, I have some proximity to these histories and feel a responsibility to them that goes beyond simply using them as a device to demonstrate that historical meaning is contested and nothing more. I believe it is possible to understand the past - but only by asking what exactly constitutes the past, which figures and accounts do we choose and how does the present bear on this reconstructed past.

Take Bernadette Devlin as an example. The period of time I was interested in looking at was roughly 1969 to 1974. This is the period of time when she was most publicly prominent but also most difficult to understand, even given the abundance of archival material available. The media at the time were interested in her, although as a curiosity: a plucky girl whom they lumped in with the student protests at the time. By and large they were more interested in what she wore than they were in her analysis of the situation in the North or her politics. After the attempted assassination on her husband Michael and herself, media attention fell and it's almost as if she ceased to be.

I found it very interesting how Devlin said that 'I didn't get involved in, politics got involved with me.' It was circumstance rather than vocation that drew her into events. This reminds me of what W.H. Auden said about W.B. Yeats that 'mad Ireland hurt you into poetry' [from Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', 1939]. For all his status as a national poet Yeats was deeply critical of the violent separatism that brought the Irish Free State into existence. Similarly, Devlin's relationship with the politics she supposedly symbolises is likewise paradoxical. She resented being singled out from the movement she was part of and the iconic status she acquired as a result. She resented, in particular, the mysticism that went with this status, and how it obscured her actual politics.

Retrospectively there is no doubt that she was a figure in whom historical potential spectacularly coalesced at the time, and one who appeared able to cancel out the contradictions of class and sectarian attachment and to carry a genuine mandate for a politics of a popular revolution. But as the situation in Northern Ireland in the 1970s became increasingly violent and the contradictions of class and sectarianism reasserted themselves with a vengeance, she became marginalised, perhaps because she would not bend her political principles to fit the new circumstances. The trouble with making this point in isolation is that sounds like a eulogy, even though Devlin is still alive. It is almost as if this heroic Devlin cannot be reconciled with what she has become: just an individual, with the same range of limited choices as any other individual.

Rather than attempting to reconcile or conceal these paradoxes I wanted to simply allow them space. I also wanted my role in process of representation to register. Daniel Jewsbury puts it best - 'it is precisely through not understanding her, not requiring her to add up, that something can be falteringly asserted.'

SC: *Do these ideas of representation also apply to Make it new John, which looks specifically at John DeLorean?*

DC: I would make a distinction between *Bernadette* and *Make it new John*, in that *Make it new John* is not as tightly focused on one individual; it is not a portrait in the same way as *Bernadette* is. My starting point

with this film was the DeLorean car and some of the mythology that has become attached to it. If you take the car as an object, the connection between perception and reality seems quite arbitrary. In terms of its essential function it is a sports car with soupy suspension that doesn't go very fast. Nevertheless it is an object that people, at the time and since - mainly men - project onto and fetishise. Because of the *Back to the Future* films it has become an icon of the 1980s.

Of course, you cannot separate the phenomenon of the car from John DeLorean himself. DeLorean was extremely successful during his time at General Motors in associating the cars he designed with particular lifestyles - for example the Pontiac G.T.O. that was marketed on the basis of its association with the muscle car scene and later with surf culture. But he also understood that you could extend the range of associations beyond the traditional mythology of mobility, progress and renewal. For a generation of growing-up hippies he offered a veneer of ethics. He briefly took up the cause of black workers in Detroit. After Ralph Nader's report into car safety in 1965 (that singled out the safety record of the Chevrolet Corvair for particular criticism), while senior management at General Motors tried to have Nader defamed by setting him up with prostitutes, DeLorean saw the potential in appealing to the nascent idea of consumer rights. This was quite remarkable at the time.

When it came to setting up the DeLorean Motor Company, DeLorean explicitly marketed it as an ethical company making an exclusive, aspirational product. His cars were to be longer lasting and more fuel efficient. The factory where they were built had better working conditions for its employees. The car and the employment it provided in its West Belfast factory was the saviour of many Catholics. All of these factors were as important as the product itself. It was an economic model that was only sustainable with massive amount of government subsidy.

One of the things that I have been surprised by, and which I am still trying to digest, is how some people have reacted to the final section of the film - which I wrote and shot myself (based largely on archival interviews with DeLorean workers). Many see this as a sentimental attempt to personalise and counterpoint the mediated notion of history represented in the archival footage that precedes it. This is far from what I intended.

When I was initially researching the project I found the fact that the workers refused to blame John DeLorean for the closure of the factory quite perplexing, even when confronted with the facts of his misuse of public money and allegations of embezzlement. I think their antipathy towards Margaret Thatcher's government - its economic new order and her belligerent approach to Northern Ireland - predominates here. But I see this thinking as being as steeped in mythology as the rest of the story: his interests and

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theirs did not coincide. The final sequence in the film reflects on this. I see the staged portion as no nearer to the truth than any other section of the film. It does not purport to be anything other than mediated and I would say that this is explicit in the way this sequence is constructed. It is an unravelling rather than a conclusion. As with *Bernadette* the intention was to open the subject up rather than be definitive or conclusive in any way.

SC: *How does their reconfiguration in your work generate a new relationship between you, your subjects and your audience?*

DC: As far as the subjects I choose goes, my aim is to open them up rather than to comprehensively capture them. It's also to look at how these histories are rehearsed and the contradictions inherent in the representations produced. I am, of course, by virtue of creating another representation, implicated in this. With both films I am interested in the methodological basis of historical materialism Marx was apparently wary that historical materialism might be construed as a substantive 'theory of history' that could serve as an excuse for not actually studying history. I do consider these specific histories and as I said earlier I feel a responsibility to them that goes beyond using them as a device. There is a balance to be had between the form and the subject.

In terms of how these films sit in the context of a gallery space, this is an evolving issue. I can't say that I am entirely happy with simply using the gallery as a de facto cinema space, which is what I have been doing for some time now. At the same time I don't think it is realistic that I would be funded to make and distribute films such as these through a more conventional cinema route.

I have made films in the past (e.g. *Joan no. . .* [2006], *Sigmar* [2008]) that are more ambient and make more of an issue of the screen as a sculptural object, and in these I was drawn to the idea of meaning being extrapolated from form alone. Neither *Bernadette* nor *Make it new John* really fit into this tradition of expanded cinema. Their placement in a gallery is ad hoc. Simon Martin said to me recently that he thinks that this tension, this falling between two stools is useful. I see his point. It becomes a less passive experience as a result. But somehow still I would like to resolve, or not resolve, this issue more consciously.

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