

A conversation between Puck Verkade and Jacob Dwyer

Jacob Dwyer: Let us begin by talking about the beginning of the film. Two circles each hosting images of a passing landscape enter the screen. The circles stop side by side and we are invited to watch the ubiquitous snow covered landscape of Hrisey, a remote Island off the north coast of Iceland, as it moves past. The back of a woman then begins to occupy the right circle and we hear what must be her voice: “It’s very quiet to be here”. ‘Okay’, I think, I’m about to watch a film about Hrisey and its inhabitants. Moments later a second character enters the circle; “People think we are isolated but I think you can get more isolated living in big cities. They don’t understand why we live here”. At this moment the circles begin to float around the screen, apparently influenced by the movement of the person who holds the camera. For me the presence of the filmmaker and your role as an outsider entering foreign lands has punctuated your work over the last few years.

Puck Verkade: Yes, the presence of the filmmaker in the process of sculpting some sort of constellation of meaning is important to me. This as a subject is just as important as the subjects captured through the lens. It is even possible to say the work is not totally about Hrisey. When the work engages with the island, it does so without trying to document it. Rather it tries to open up ideas about what, as a remote island, Hrisey can potentially represent. Without getting too philosophical I want to portray the island as a representation of two elements that are essential for an individual. The first being an existential relationship with nature and the second dealing with the presence/absence of the other.

JD: Okay, well it has been described that just like its inhabitants, the island becomes a character. Would you agree with this, and if so do you believe that you become the third character?

PV: I don’t see the island and its inhabitants as characters, but as parts that together form a whole. The work is not directly about them. As I’ve mentioned its more about the potential of what they can represent. What an island with its borders and isolation so clearly defined, what that can represent. I don’t however disagree with the fact that perhaps I myself, as an artist traveling to Hrisey, become a character. In fact my face is the only human face to enter the work, if only for a couple of frames. I am the

'character' gleaned information to take back to the mainland and edit into a film. This way, I hope to expose awareness of the camera being present. In every work I make, the camera's presence is directly acknowledged by either breaking the fourth wall, by literally discussing its features, or through 'human' handheld camera movements. I hope this creates a certain shift of perception in the viewer as they become more aware, not only of their own position but of the position of the maker who manipulates the narrative. This might also translate to thinking about how we all construct a narrative of our lives.

JD: So we as an audience are invited to view this character (yourself) through an edited selection of information and imagery she gleaned whilst residing on Hrisey. Could you perhaps explain a little more about the economy of information you chose to capture?

PV: Sure, someone once asked me about the fetishization of my subjects. This is something I'm extremely conscious of when traveling to a place and culture that is not my own. On the one hand I'm interested in ideas of the cliché, and the politics of both maintaining and destroying them. On the other, as I have mentioned this film is not about the people of the island. It was not my intention to stereotype or objectify anyone, neither was it my intention to open up more complex and fragile depictions of a people. It was to push both personal ideas and clichéd ideas around larger subjects such as reclusion, solitude and finiteness.

JD: In this regard we could possibly say the characters become hosts of an aura. Or perhaps even platforms on which you build an aura through the questions you ask them. It's interesting that unlike your previous work we never hear these questions. I am interested as to where they came from? And also, how scripted they were before traveling to Hrisey?

PV: In earlier works I would approach subjects and situations quite straightforwardly. Asking questions while being on screen as the filmmaker was part of that working process as well as the end result. But with this subject I wanted to occupy a more reclusive position so that my presence is more of a hint of saying 'you are not alone.' As for the questions, those were not scripted at all before arriving in Hrisey. Obviously I had ideas around why I wanted to be there, but those initial ideas were mostly presumptions of what it would be like to live on a remote island, very much based on exoticism. For the first two weeks I decided to immerse myself in isolation. I did not speak to anyone and documented the landscape in the process.

I think the only words that were uttered were “hi” to the cashier at the tiny supermarket. I wanted to experience life within the borders of this landscape, before engaging with its residents. I feel that without experiencing this it is only possible to access the island from a conceptual position defined by being an outsider to it. I’m also aware however that the legitimacy of total isolation is fairly dubious, especially when documenting it with a camera. The lens almost becomes a bystander of isolation, a conscious witness of being alone. It is interesting actually; I have had this feeling that other than myself the only other character in the work could be the camera.

JD: Yes that is interesting. I believe that much of the film was shot with a go pro camera. The nature of this camera as something designed to be connected to the human body as it moves through space is interesting. It seems you play with this. Often the images align with those processed by human vision (yours) and at others it detaches itself. At one moment it turns back on itself momentarily capturing your eyes as they squint through falling snow; snow that the camera and we do not feel. There was one other shot that stuck with me. The circle floats organically towards the floor before resting on the sand at the outer limits of the island. Uncontaminated by the human hand, the image stabilizes itself. Then the sea moves towards us and washes over before the camera is recovered from the elements by human hands. As the work continues, we begin to realise that the circles’ movement is somehow the inverted product of stabilizing the image in post-production. To keep the filmed subjects in the same position within the frame, the circle must work against the shaking hands of the filmmaker. Within this dialogue we witness the combined desire to present a stable image to an audience. This frantic circle desperately maintains linear perspective. For me this provoked ideas around human desire for stability and grounding. This is definitely something I have recognized in your previous works. Could you expand on your personal ideas surrounding the human construction of meaning?

PV: I’m mainly interested in how human beings give meaning to life and the ambiguity of belief systems. The act of believing, the sense of credibility, the construction of reality. These ideas, I believe, all circle around manipulation as some sort of survival strategy. I feel drawn to subjects that expose the human psychological condition, the way we construct our identity through these belief-systems and the individual’s position within society. By fully immersing myself in an unknown situation, my own vulnerability acts as a tool to get to the core of the subject from

an 'insider's' perspective. In my opinion the video camera is the most direct tool to explore these elements, because the medium carries these ambiguities in itself. In *Any Day Now* (2011) for example I live and interact with members of a Christian community who are preparing themselves for the Apocalypse. Another example can be found in *Persona* (2013), where my father and I join a spiritual retreat. It is in a similar vein that I travelled to Hrisey.

JD: Unlike these two works that you mention, however, *Solitary Company* is to become the first part of a triptych of videos all made on this island. How do you intend this first part to eventually sit within the triptych? And what can we expect from the other films to come?

PV: I am planning to go back in summer when the island has transformed into a luscious paradise. That's when I want to film episodes two and three. The position of the camera and what it aligns itself with will move through different stances. I don't however, want to narrow them down before making them. But right now I can say that the triptych of episodes will begin by focusing on 'the other's perspective'. So that's this first episode. Then in episode two it will move into 'the god's perspective'. I will work with a drone to recreate Google earth perspectives. Then lastly in episode three I will approach the idea of an 'insiders' perspective', possibly attaching cameras to the locals. Inevitably these ideas will each shift and warp, but as they stand they provide a base for me to begin.

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Jacob Dwyer (1988) is an artist and writer based in Amsterdam. After completing his residency at De Ateliers Jacob has remained in Amsterdam where he continues to make work and contribute as a writer for *Metropolis M*. Before this he received the AHRC studentship to complete a Masters in Experimental Film at Kingston University (London). His work has been presented at the BFI (London), IDFA (Amsterdam), Gallerie Julliette Jongma (Amsterdam) and Herrmann Germann Contemporary (Zurich). In April he won the Project Pitch award at KINO DER KUNST film festival (Munich).