Adam Roberts interview

Roger Clark: Do you know the Maxim Gorky review from 1896 when he saw the Lumiere Brothers film the first time in Russia? It was the first time any film ever was screened in Russia. There was a famous quote which is, "Tonight I have stayed in the kingdom of shadows." He was really possessed with how spooky film was. He talks about seeing card players and he said people out there are already ghosts because they're going to be playing cards for eternally.

What you've done in this film is you've, far from making films spooky, you've exorcised film. You've actually removed the ghosts from film.

Adam Roberts: Actually, I have heard that review now that you mention it and it's a lovely phrase.

Roger: I really thought this phrase "kingdom of shadows" kept coming back to me when I was watching.

Adam: I think what springs to mind, really, straight away is that, in some ways, when cinema, film, was invented it seemed like what struck people most was its invocational capacity. I think it must have been astonishing to be able to see this light show. Although there had been plenty of antecedent light shows, magic lantern shows, lanternists, et cetera, bringing shadows to life and probably gawky hat scenes, something like that, and probably shadow puppet shows would have been in his mind.

Probably that's where the thought came from. I suppose as cinema, in the course of 100 years, has become more of a naturalistic medium it's formally settled down, the so-called classical mode contains narratives, dialogue, the pattern of cut and reverse angle, the idea of somebody looking and then cutting to see what they see, all of these measures have removed the awareness of the magic of a film image, really.

I quite like the fact that there are certainly people who, by going back to silent era cinema, and there's a person I probably would like to mention who often works in silent film material, Ken Jacobs from New York, the famous avant-garde filmmaker. He is constantly reworking and going back to silent film material and he loves films of the Biograph era. He loves tableaus. He reworks them and scrutinizes the frames and looks for something elemental in the actual grain of the film.

It's kind of looking for ghosts in a way. He did a marvelous film, which I think is worth just to mention it now. He took Buster Keeton's "Cops" and blanked out the top four fifths of the frame so that's just black. All you see is a strip and then just the base of the picture which is typically feet or empty frame, empty space. It's the whole film re-photographed of a screen blanked out.

What he was trying to get back to, I read in interviews, I actually can't remember what he said. I'll have to pass on that. Does that answer what you think about?

Roger: Yes. There is an aspect of silent movies about your project. It is sometimes like watching a silent film with a radio on somehow. I go back to what you said, I found it odd that you said that Adam had taken spooks out of the film because I actually found it quite a spooky experience.

Ian Monk: That's what I felt initially. It was a very spooky film. I was interested in that paradox because just this morning we read the Gorky review. I realized that you could see it in two ways. In some ways you had actually removed the ghosts even though, ostensibly, it's a very obviously spooky film, that you're hearing voices from the walls almost.

Roger: Yes. One way of looking at it is almost the memory of the events has been frozen into the furniture or into the walls and you're hearing voices coming out of the...

Ian: Stone tapes.

Roger: ...the Stone tapes, yes. There's a famous story to do with the stone tape, the idea that voices and memories and images are somehow imprinted onto organic matter. For example, when they moved the paneling from an Elizabethan house to another house the ghosts went with it, went with the paneling.

Ian: Were engrained into the materiality of the world.

Roger: There's a big bed in the VNA museum called the bed of ware and it's a haunted bed and the ghosts go wherever the bed goes. Talking about beds, I was interested as to why when you did close-ups of pillows you didn't do an indent of a head on the pillow? What were your reasons not to do that?

Adam: It's not exactly reasons. I suppose it's more of a decision. For example, if a door opens or closes it doesn't physically open or close. If a physical being imprinted and left a mark that would be like a door opening and closing and also a curtain was one minute opened and one minute closed.

Roger: It would be a very different effect wouldn't it?

Adam: It would be, really, but that would then moving in the direction where...

Roger: That would be a human presence not a suggestion of one.

Adam: It would be more of a ghost film, right.

Roger: Is that why, also, the cars do not appear because I could see, watching it again, that you could actually show a car without showing somebody in the car.

Adam: Yes. That did cross my mind. The project, basically, is to re-shoot the film shot for shot, focus pull, pan for pan, and the odd rhythm of it because it's following the cut pattern which is driven, as all films are, by what people are doing in the frame.

Roger: How do you avoid 30 minutes of basically that?

Adam: That's another decision which is a decision to dispense with subplots.

Ian: There are some scenes which are not there, having seen the original.

Adam: The subplot's about there's a young man in pursuit of the woman and that's gone. Then I thought what I want to do is I want it to be laden with a sense of genre patterns but remove all of the logic, as it were, with impunity. For instance, you don't get explanations, the normal plot expositional explanations. I didn't really think it mattered really if that was in or out.

What matters is the heavily genre-driven pattern of filmmaking and the fact that the genre has things which are typical across all of those low budget horror films. We kind of, in our DNA, know, after 100 years of cinema, we know what to expect. I suppose what also became clear, really, trying to make it was that actually things have an extraordinary kind of life, the settings, and the odd framings of them.

It does kind of remind me slightly of ghost hunters in a way because they often take a photograph and they think they're taking a photograph of the room and what suddenly becomes interesting is something that's in an unexpected, off-center place. In fact, that seems to me what is nice about these framings, which are dictated by the original filmmaking, is that there's all this off-centeredness.

In fact, it produced a visual style which is quite unusual.

Ian: I had a curious experience. Occasionally I'd just look to the side away from the screen as I was watching and I would almost see figures in the corner of my eye but when I looked back they were no longer there. The brain was just trying to fill in, populating the space. It was a very strange experience.

Adam: I suppose if you've seen films all your life you have an ingrained sense of what to expect in terms of how the camera is looking. It seems to me that a pan to follow, to use that technical phrase, or the tilt when somebody stands when they get off a chair, there's a particular way that it's done which is highly recognizable.

Is it so unlikely that you're going to fill in the being that supposedly motivates that way of looking?

Roger: I seem to recall that a lot of our perception is being filled in all the time anyway by our brain banks and our memory. We're not necessarily seeing what's there anyway. It's all being constantly filled in by our mind.

Adam: I think what you're thinking is something about the fact that to watch film is far from passive. Obviously you're sitting in a chair in a stationary way but of course you're looking with a complete set of expectations. Your mind is constantly writing into that space. What I quite wanted to do this thing for was to find out what an audience would write into this void.

There is a way of thinking, "Oh well." There's an interesting thing which you could say this is a project to explore or reveal or investigate the fact that a camera is, in a way, it has no preferences. Where it points and what it looks at is directed by an operator who has a theory about what's of interest. But of course, to a camera, anything is as good as anything else. It's highly democratic.

Only by removing the people do you find out just how peculiar that is.

Ian: Actually, it's true. I was really craving a human face, and I realized how comfortable it was to watch human faces when I looked at the original with these sorts of very glamorous women. And the film was very unnerving because simply there were no faces to follow. It shouldn't have been more difficult to watch, but it was.

Roger: Well, one of my initial reactions if you remember when we first discussed doing this was to say that I felt that you'd used the medium of film in a much more interesting way than handsome man meets beautiful woman for the 113th time in the cinema. And on the contrary, I found it extremely enriching not to have the distraction of thinking what going out with the woman on the screen might be like.

Adam: But I think you might...that's partly why I kind of had the feeling that you might respond to it as a project, as a concept. Partly because as we know, your literary activities involve working within constraints, so you're not necessarily...to you it would be not unlikely to say, have a novel which dispensed with immediately visible front-and-center protagonists. So as we know, it's been done. So in a way I think it's...but what's interesting is why film is so marginally...

Roger: What's interesting about that, though, in terms of taking the characters out of the film is not really what I would call a constraint. Because it's adopted the same angles, the same shots. It's almost like, if it had been a constraint you would have had to come up with other ways of filming to avoid seeing the people in the film, if you see what I mean, whereas you've just taken the people out.

Ian: Because they were being summoned up by the soundtrack.

Roger: Certainly, but what I mean by that is, instead of...if he decided in some way to make it a kind of lipogram. Lipogram is where you take out elements, like writing without letters, for example. There you have to find strategies to say what you want to say, but you can't say it in a normal way. If you take E out, you can't use the letter E, you can't say I love you, for example, because love has an E in it. So you have to find a way around that.

Whereas what you've done is not exactly the same thing, because you've taken the characters out, the physical presence of the characters out of the film. But if you'd done it in terms of a constraint, you would have actually had the characters in the film and found angles and...

Adam: And filmed 'round them, as it were.

Roger: ...so that you wouldn't actually see them, if you see what I mean. It's not exactly the same thing.

Adam: It would be, yes, you could easily conceive of a film like that, and it would be a good film to make [laughs] .

Ian: So it's an absence rather than a constraint.

Adam: Well, I think I'd look at it, I'd either conceive of it as an absence, or you could say that, is it something's been erased, or is it something has simply been made more visible than it would otherwise normally be allowed to be?

Roger: But by erasing certain things, you make other things more visible. It's not at all a contradiction.

Adam: Well, that's the sort of...

Ian: But in some ways you've also made a sort of landscape film. You're just sort of filming the landscape of wallpaper in rooms. It's a landscape film, which is very...but no, just getting back to this subject of faces. I don't mean fantasizing about your interaction with the character. I mean, just a basic, almost, you're a baby in a pram looking out at faces. And the incredible power that just any face has on you to evoke reactions, and when they're not there, it's very strange.

Roger: It is very strange, but very stimulating. Because one of the things I dislike about blockbuster films with famous actors is, all I see personally is the famous actor. I don't see the character. And I think that's probably the same...You know, if you live in France you see Gerard Depardieu playing Gerard Depardieu playing such-and-such a character.

Ian: Getting fatter and fatter.

Roger: Yes, and all you see is Gerard Depardieu. You don't see the character he's playing. Hence I think the interest for certain moviemakers, filmmakers of using unknown actors. Because then you see the character, you don't see the actor. And there you've taken it a step further, where you just don't see anyone, which is I think extremely interesting.

Ian: There is this sort of distant prospect of CGI actors, I suppose. There have been a few actually fairly mainstream Hollywood films that have flirted with the idea that in the end, maybe they won't even need actors, they'll just do sort of generated figures.

But I think people like their film stars. There's a new form of journalism which is just all about how much you fancy the stars, and all the interview is how much you fancy that person, and that is a way of judging the film is your perceived fan relationship with the actor. And the actors have just become more and more...what it's about in mainstream filmmaking, and the baggage and the other films that they bring with them. And so it's almost not just about...that's what so interesting about removing the actor is it couldn't be more opposite the way our culture's going in idolizing actors who are the sort of new aristocrats.

Adam: Well, I suppose it is true, because there is that kind of Greek god kind of function of current superstar actors. They are ageless, immune to all kinds of ordinary considerations, and supremely kind of influential in our lives.

I don't know, I suppose yes, it is a depopulated world. But what I think is there, there is something that I think I hoped would come through, which is it's a very...obviously it's a film shot in black and white, and Tri-X, a very old if not the oldest currently available film stock. It's a film made just as celluloid, and certainly black and white, silver nitrate-based chemistry, this is the end of that road. So there's been 100 years of using coated film and projecting light through it.

And I suppose I did want to impart...I don't know whether the word memorialize is the right word, but to a certain extent, this is the shadow play that has fascinated and absorbed people -- me -- for 100 years. And I suppose I did want to try and touch something that I thought was elemental and

special about the way the camera looks at things that is unusual. And I did think there was a problem if you have the faces in there. There was a problem that you kind of buy into, a kind of psychological relationship between yourself and the other, that kind of didn't really have anything to do with what I was trying to celebrate. I wanted to celebrate this thing, this film experience. Even halfway or in the second half of my life, I still don't really understand it, but it still holds extraordinary power over me.

And I think it is a peculiar experience. To me it has a kind of...I mean, one of the reasons for this film, choosing this film is I have to say I love the fact that it's all about chemistry. When people talk about film labs, they always talk about chemistry. The endless application of technique and technology in order to achieve ever-greater layers of glamour, and to enhance the image and to perfect and to perpetuate the beauty and the loved object that all cinema or filmmaking aims to present ever more perfectly. So I quite like the fact that in the film this is the constant quest, especially in the condensed form. It focuses much more on this scientific quest, which is of course a very poor pastiche, a remake of Eyes Without a Face.

Roger: Yes, because the original film's a film about skin, isn't it? [inaudible 22:52] . And it's about the face and the skin.

Adam: And Franju's film is about a daughter and a father, and taking the skin of young women and using it to patch up his daughter's damaged face. This one gives it a kind of fake kind of pseudo-scientific '60s edge, talking about treatments and extracts and all of this sort of...and it's all set in laboratories, and has procedures in a way that feels very far away from the Franju, even though it is a thinly veiled remake.

So I can't remember quite what I was saying, except that I feel this project has to do with an absorption, or why it was a good choice was because the soundtrack circles around this idea of trying to save something that's fading fast is inevitably doomed to become monstrous. Which of course film, in a way, you could argue has become monstrous, or cinema has become monstrous.

Roger: Also, one of the pleasures of the original is that there's quite an element of camp in it as well.

Adam: You mean in the Seddok, L'Erede di Satana original, or Eyes Without a Face?

Roger: Yes, exactly.

Adam: Seddok, AKA Atom Age Vampire.

Roger: Atom Age Vampire.

Adam: Just to be clear, yes.

Roger: There was a very enjoyable camp element to it, which partly because you cut out the subplots, it's sort of no longer sort of accessible. Was that sort of deliberate, to remove the camp? Because I know you enjoy camp. It's not like you're anti-camp.

Adam: No, I'm very much pro-camp. If the camp went, there was more of the melodramatic terms. The cries, I love the cries of the women, the shrill shrieking of despair in moments of crisis.

Roger: [laughs]

Adam: I do like that, and I have to say that I think is quite camp. And I quite like the idea of a man who presumes to know all, that seems to me quite a camp idea. Which I think, a man who claims to know all is probably the least butch kind of image I could possibly imagine, ironically.

Roger: Yes, and all that marvelous Italian fashion of course is gone.

Adam: Yes, the Italian, all that early 60s Italian fashion is gone, sadly, and what we're left with is these rather sort of strange English provincial interiors and English country roads.

Roger: Funny enough, again in the original, I found that the fashion was what, I kept looking at the clothes more than the faces. It was kind of [crosstalk 25:46] .

Ian: It's another distraction.

Roger: Yes.

Adam: I mean, I think those are the undoubted pleasures of cinema, especially cinema of that era. That era of fashion is recycled endlessly now, whether it's television series about advertising executives in New York or it's an English serialization of Italian detectives, supposedly in some kind of a present, but dressed in those fashions. These are things that I'm sure designers and image makers, they plunder that. Because it does have a tremendous appeal.

Ian: As an eternal optimist, Adam, do you feel that now that technically, in cinema, as you were saying earlier, Roger, why not just dispense with that completely and just have synthetic, computer-generated characters? I'm sure this would be a lot cheaper...

Roger: Yes.

Ian: ...and quicker, because you won't have diva antics on set and so on and so forth. Do you that may at the same time open the way to the opposite trend, that is to say, something that's always slightly disappointed me about film is that there's this obsession with going toward something which is "realistic." The more it looks like reality, whatever reality is supposed to be, the better, whereas film is, of course, artifice.

Adam: Yes.

Ian: So it's not real. What I enjoy about your work in that film as an example, is that you once again show up the fact that what we're looking at is something which has been concocted by a filmmaker. And it's not just turning on the...of course it's never that. But the ambition of certain filmmakers seems to be the idea that you're looking at something where I could have just turned on the camera and filmed real people doing real things.

Adam: Well, obviously, when that's done well, it's admirable. But I think it's kind of, I suppose it's a risky strategy to be a filmmaker if you do want to expose artifice. I've been lucky enough to be able to make some films where I don't mind relinquishing control. Whereas, of course, normally, if you're hired as a film director, you're hired on the basis that you can exert control.

And I'm lucky to have been able to work in contexts and situations where my decision to relinquish control is acceptable. So, for instance, in this case, I didn't control how the cuts were in the editing or the framings, because I handed that responsibility over to an original that, certainly those filmmakers didn't have in mind how I would re-treat what they designed.

Roger: So you do feel that it was a constraint, that personally your experience was that it was constraining.

Adam: Well, I don't know. I think that constraint is a specific term in the way Ian was using it, and probably it isn't a constraint in that specific sense. But on the other hand, in normal filmmaking terms, it was a considerable abdication of authority. And other films I've made other decisions, like basing all the edits on a set of numbers arrived at randomly, and then following them without question. So it doesn't really matter...but it's quite a risky strategy, because filmmakers, when describing what they do, they talk about their own command and their own adept skills. And so it's their unique and special ability to organize and deliver a shape...

Ian: Your own unique ability also comes through this film. Because if somebody else had followed exactly the same procedure, the film would no doubt look completely different.

Adam: It would. But that's the thing. It's an unusual decision to go down this path. So all I'm saying is, naturalism, and that sort of idiom, it takes a lot of skill to do that.

Ian: I'm not saying the opposite. I'm just saying that, I don't know, painting, to a certain degree, was freed up by photography.

Adam: Yes. I see what you mean.

Ian: To a certain degree. I think people exaggerate this idea that once photography was invented, you no longer had to paint realistic portraits or landscapes, because photography did it better. Well, that's a bit exaggerated, but there's a certain element of truth in it.

Adam: Well, painting reinvented itself...

Ian: Yeah.

Adam: And Cezanne...

Ian: So you can't film that [crosstalk 30:59]

Adam: ...shattered the single-point approach.

Ian: Once we've got to a state where computer-generated images can make reality much, much simpler, can't we perhaps reinvent cinema at the same time?

Adam: Well, maybe. I think that's a good thing. Let's lay in plenty of stocks of Tri-X...

Ian: I'm asking a question as an eternal optimist.

Adam: Well, my advice is, let's lay in plenty of supplies of Tri-X film now, while it's still available, in that case. Because that's in a way...but I don't know. Would an audience that's never

particularly seen grainy black-and-white film, and there must be new audiences who won't have seen anything like that, will they be able to see that? Will they see any value in it or any interest? Will in fact only a digital CGI image hold...I don't know.

When the change came from egg tempera to oil painting, perhaps better to think of that, what happened 50 years after oil painting had started? Did people look at egg tempera and say, oh, we don't like it, look at that. That's not a very...

Roger: Have you noticed the popularity, in phones, of these sort of retro...

Adam: Retro looks.

Roger: Apps, and one's a Polaroid.

Adam: There's the Polaroid one. There's the scratchy black-and-white ones, yes.

Roger: And as far as I can tell, they're quite popular. People are quite interested by that aesthetic, I mean, if you're just talking purely about...

Adam: Do you think this film has nostalgic qualities? Does it offer itself as nostalgia?

Roger: Yes, yeah, yeah. In a way. But it also feels very modern. Yes, it has quite a tomb-like memorial atmosphere, but it's also...

Ian: Well, yeah. It's nostalgic and forward-looking. But I think, I can't remember whether we discussed this together before, but do you think the invention of sound in the cinema was to a certain degree a disaster?

Adam: Suddenly the camera stopped moving...

Roger: Yeah, because...

Adam: Because it had to be encased in a box?

Roger: Film tends to be, well, it's very limited in the extent to which it could be realistic...

Adam: Yes.

Roger: ...because you couldn't actually have dialogue. Well, you couldn't really do post-dubbing. There really had to be sound, they had just two cameras, and it was all very clumsy. All the framing was very clumsy. But actually, getting back to Gorky, actually, I think that was one of the things that most unnerved him, was the silence of the train coming towards him. It was the silence that was so ghostly.

Adam: That is one of the things you have to remember about those Lumière film projections.

Roger: I mean, I still, for me...

Adam: No synch sound of any kind.

Roger: ...Nosferatu is still, the Murnau, Nosferatu is still the scariest film ever made.

Adam: Yes.

Roger: For me, personally.

Adam: But it's odd, isn't it, because in that film, one of the marvelous spectral effects is that he moves without apparent means, and he's completely silent. The vampire can appear. And then of course, the contemporary film is to add moves, the sound of rustling footsteps, endlessly and obsessionally to add them, so that nothing moves without a tremendous sound of friction. And it's almost a compulsive urge to provide that audio presence. Because it's not enough that maybe...

Ian: Whereas you sort of put the sound in a box, sort of offstage, somehow.

Adam: And it's lo-fi.

Ian: It's lo-fi.

Adam: It's the worst, most degraded audio.

Ian: Yes. It sounds like a little radio.

Adam: Yes.

Ian: So that's why I said it's a bit like Mexican radio or something like that.

Adam: I suppose you might ask why keep the audio, and having dispensed with the people. Why not have, say, a soundtrack, which is just what you call a music and effects track. So remove the dialogue. Because if the people are gone, why should you hear the dialogue? I suppose I just didn't have any comments. I don't have anything I particularly want to say about soundtracks.

Ian: Yeah.

Adam: What I'm interested in, specifically, is the film image. So that is to be worked with, whereas the audio is to be left alone, because it's not...I mean, I suppose there is another film where you would have just [indecipherable 35:41] . And you might even go for a hi-fi version. You might recreate it in the best-possible quality sound, I don't know. But I think that would signal very much to a contemporary sound practice. But it is, the contemporary soundtrack is so different to, say, classical Hollywood or any other kind of...

Ian: It's just a racket, isn't it, half the time.

Adam: It's an extraordinary dense world. And it's often, the filmmakers don't have any say, the teams producing the audio soundtracks often work completely independently, sound departments endlessly manufacturing hundreds of tracks of sound. The final mix is undertaken by teams of people, because they're so complicated, no one mixer can contain it all.

So that means the decision about what to do is being passed into a network and doesn't really remain in the control of the filmmaker. And post-production...

Ian: It's corporate filmmaking, now.

Adam: Yeah. Well, the post-production lasts for a year, often. Because it's so complex. And filmmakers, directors, the so-called auteurs, are elsewhere.

Roger: Also, going back to actors, one of the great things particularly with Hollywood, and to some extent 1930s cinema in Europe, is the relationship between the director and his actors...

Adam: Yes.

Roger: ...which is often quite complex. And that is often part of the whole folklore of the film. And so again, it's interesting to see, what was the experience like of just...were you just completely on your own when you were filming it? And just, or who else was there?

Adam: Yes. No, no, it was mostly.

Roger: So it's a sort of solitary business.

Adam: It was a very interestingly solitary business, because filmmaking usually involves teams and crews, as you say, families who work together. And it's a very intense kind of work. So this was very odd. And I really enjoyed a return to this kind of handmade, you know, I bought a camera. I shot it myself. And it would have been quite nice to process the film myself. I have processed black-and-white film. But I know that I'm too unreliable at doing it. And I wasn't really keen to have that particular experience, aesthetic, if you like.

Roger: So were you just sort of sitting there in a sort of meditative state as the camera was rolling, or were you doing a crossword or...

Adam: The problem is, I had to play the film, write detailed notes, and do a storyboard, and then I had a clipboard with that on it, and then I had to recreate these shots. And some of them were quite difficult to do. I think the worst one was a lens flare, which, there's an operating sort of table...

Roger: When it goes up.

Adam: And there's a lens flare, which, mind you, I had a very bad-quality QuickTime of the original, and I wasn't sure whether it was a lens flare or a digital fault. But I decided it was a lens flare, so I had to shoot into a light. And I don't quite know when a lens flare occurs and when it doesn't. So those were the absorbing tasks. So I wasn't alone.

And obviously my mind was wholly engrossed in a really quite peculiar, and difficult in some ways...the other thing is of course that, in order to do focus pulls. I didn't have a camera system. I got the help with one group of shots, because I had a broken leg at the time. But mainly doing the focus pulls myself was very, very difficult. And the camera moves, the original camera moves are not smooth.

And I exaggerated more or less everything. If something in the original was out of focus, I made it more out of focus, a background. If a camera move was a bit joggy, I made it more joggy. So I didn't spend a lot of time trying to achieve the kind of perfection. And it seemed to me that I had to

follow a kind of a logic of the remakes. Franju's film is very accomplished and beautiful and well-made. Seedok's Atom-Age Vampire is much less so. So it seemed to me that if I'm remaking, I need to continue the trajectory. It needs to become rougher. And I think I achieved that. It's certainly a rough edge.

Roger: It's funny, two films this year, Dominick Moll's The Monk and the Almodovar, though, again, they have people with masks in there. It's interesting how uncanny the whole mask thing seems and then the face, they're still very much messing around with the face somehow.

Adam: I think that Franju story feels like a contemporary fairy story. It feels like it ought to have some kind of antecedent in folk, a folkloric antecedent. But I can't think of one, particularly. But the idea that beauty requires the cannibalization of others, that it's somehow made by men and science and technology, or technique, the instrumentality of a man in a white coat...

Ian: Just before I came over, I saw L'Apollonide, Memories of A Parisian Brothel, where there were numerous scenes with masks as well.

Roger: Yeah. No. Right.

Adam: Surgical masks, or...

Ian: No, no, no. Natural looking.

Adam: Carnival, carnival.

Ian: Because one of the prostitutes has her mouth cut, so she's got a heavily scarred face. So she hides behind a mask.

Roger: Well, in the Moll film, which is an adaptation of the English gothic novel...

Ian: Matthew Lewis, yes.

Roger: ...she comes into the monastery to seduce them, and there's a woman masquerading as a man, who claims she's had this horrific fire.

Ian: She claims to be a leper, I think, no?

Roger: Yeah, no, in the film, I can't remember the book detail, but she claims she's had a horrific injury from a fire...

Ian: Oh, the fire, yes.

Roger: And so she comes in with this really creepy mask on, pretending to be a man, really. But in fact it's a woman out to seduce the saintly Ambrosio. And some of the shots of just this figure standing with the mask, it's extraordinarily uncanny.

Adam: Is it because you're denied the relationship with a kind of human face?

Roger: Yes.

Adam: A motherly face.

Roger: A sort of mechanism face. There's something incredibly disturbing about masks and [inaudible 42:53] . This is particularly well-designed [indecipherable 42:56].

Adam: Is that part of what you were saying earlier about standing out in the pram?

Roger: Yes. I mean, all my favorite films approximate dreams. I've noticed this, a real theme in the films I like. For me, the best films are not the realistic ones. They are the ones that are most like dreams. And that's what I particularly liked about this film, is the very dreamlike quality. It's like you're feeling asleep and you can hear something, girls going on in some way.

Ian: Talking about staring out at the pram, apparently babies, and don't take this badly, Roger, but babies recognize people by their hairline.

Roger: Yes.

Ian: And so what the mask effectively does is to take that away. So you're kind of losing the markers of the face and mouth.

Adam: So is it the shape or position of the hairline?

Ian: Well apparently, it's the shape and position of the hairline. So as a parent if you have a radical haircut, and if the baby freaks out for a while, until they get used to it...

Roger: Interesting.

Adam: Because I suppose it's a point, it's the maximum contrast.

Ian: Yes, it's the maximum contrast.

Adam: And it's not complex.

Roger: Well, I suppose it's probably just that area, probably here, isn't it?

Adam: Yeah.

Roger: The eyes or just above it. Maybe if you're wearing glasses you have an artificial hairline.

Ian: So it may be the purpose of wearing a hat was to, as it were, deny others sight of your hairline.

Roger: Perhaps. Or a wig. [indecipherable 44:33] , etc.

Ian: Yes.

Roger: Love wigs.

Ian: Standardizing, well, I don't know. I'd never heard that. For some reason that's freaked me out.

[laughter]

Ian: Oh my God. Well, I don't know what else to say about the film at the moment.

Roger: There seem to be two kinds of essential directors. One that are really into their actors. They like to workshop the actors. They have this almost over-obsessive relationship with the whole craft of acting. And then there are the other directors who, like Hitchcock or Polanski or people like that, who don't really want to have anything to do with them and sort of slightly despise them. And I was just wondering which one you were.

[laughs]

Well, maybe something in between.

Adam: Well, I'm...actually, a couple of projects ago, I made a two-screen thing, where the camera just followed, obsessively followed individuals who were just idling, killing time in a room. And that film, you could say, is the opposite. Because it deals with them more or less only in close-up, there is no sense of the space whatsoever. There's just uninterrupted, it's intended to be looped.

So it feels like an endless observation only of individuals, following and tracking them around. And I loved the, in a sense, it was a chance to, I'm operating the camera, shooting that. It was a chance to be absorbed in the grain, the sheer grain of a performance. And I loved that chance.

And it was kind of an extraordinary exercise for me, partly because it involved a very live performance-like engagement with the actor filming. It wasn't chopped up into repeatable sections. There could only be one take. So I was as present in their moment of...

Roger: And your crowd's last take, that was quite intense.

Adam: That was very, very detailed, actorly. I like working with actors. But on the other hand I also think there's something about cinema that I think deserves some kind of attention. People get a lot of attention in the movies and on television. But there's something else about its nature, its philosophical nature, that is worth looking at. I really liked making this film. It was, I don't know, maybe it feels like a film that I almost certainly wouldn't have been making when I was 20.

Roger: I don't know whether it's me just reading into it, but I certainly get a sense of you, a sort of solitary sense of you making this film. Maybe I'm just reading into it too much.

Adam: Yeah. Think of a monastic scribe...

Ian: Yes.

Adam: ...in tower, copying out...

Ian: Scratching away.

Adam: ...scratching away, recopying manuscripts whose meaning he's unaware of, making mistakes in the transcription. But doggedly continuing.

Ian: There was actually another thing I wanted to say about the soundtrack, because of course the soundtrack you put on is already a dubbed soundtrack.

Adam: Yes.

Ian: And so when you watch it, the soundtrack we're hearing is not the original soundtrack.

Adam: No.

Ian: It was what, American dub?

Adam: It is an American dub, and the rhythm of it is because they're trying to follow another language's mouth movements. So the rhythm of it is not even natural for English.

Ian: So it's several times removed from, there's already...

Adam: Yes.

Ian: ...artifice on artifice.

Adam: Yes. That's definitely part of the charm for me. And where it ends up with that, it is so evidently an artifice, and I quite like the fact that the people making the dubbed soundtrack were committed to following the mouth movements of the original. So they had abdicated a certain authority.

Ian: So they're doing a little bit as you've done, sort of following a...

Adam: Yes. I think is that kind of...

Ian: So this is almost like a...

Adam: It's like dubbed.

Ian: Dubbed.

Adam: It is like if you have, in order to make those dubbed versions, you do...I suppose, actually, that's a very nice way of putting it. It's kind of a visual version of a dubbed film. I don't know. Does that make sense?

Ian: I don't know.

Adam: [laughs] It appeals to me.

Ian: It's a kind of sound version of a silent film, and the visual version of a dubbed film.

Roger: What if you'd filmed...

Adam: Let me keep a note of that.

Roger: Say that again.

Adam: That's very good, I like that.

Ian: It's a sound version of a...

Adam: Silent film...

Ian: And a visual version of a dubbed film.

Adam: And a visual version of a dubbed film. That seems...

Roger: What would have happened if you'd photographed it and there had been a ghostly figure sitting in one of the chairs?

Ian: Oh, that would have been cool.

Adam: [laughs]

Roger: Would you have kept it in? That there had been an inadvertent spectral..

Adam: A kind of lens flare which...

Roger: Well, no, I mean an inadvertent spectral ghostly event.

Adam: Well, I think I probably would have had to revise my entire worldview.

[laughter]

Adam: That would have been quite difficult to do, being a wholly inflexible person. I would hope I would have the ability to adapt...

Roger: Right.

Adam: ...my understanding. It would be nice to include something like that. I'm not averse to accident. Obviously, there are few accidents in it, because in a sense, there is no accident. There can be no accident. Because everything is predetermined.

Roger: What do you think of, then, as ghostly? I mean, because this is in some ways a ghostly film and you are a strict rationalist. So I'm intrigued that you're making such a ghostly film.

Adam: Yes. I don't know. I think all cinema has that uncanny quality. Because as Gorky said, as you said right at the beginning, there is something about the fact those card players, they're no longer playing cards. They may well be dead. And here they are endlessly replaying that same game of cards. That is much stranger than...in an age of digital downloads, it's very hard to hold on to that peculiar, strange fact.

But it is an odd thing, but the likeness, that some people don't like being photographed, they shun cameras. And it's worth bearing in that mind some people really don't like being photographed, even in the era with Facebook and endless uploading of images.

It's taken so for granted that somehow these are not records of real places and real events.

Roger: Right.

Adam: They're not.

Roger: I've noticed Facebook recently introduced a technology which is face recognition technology, too. So if someone else puts up a photograph of you, you're informed. I find that quite creepy, actually.

Adam: And even more creepy is the camera technology that can tell when you're smiling in order to only take photographs when you're smiling, which is... [laughs]

Roger: It's like T. S. Eliot getting upset by the advent of a kiss-proof lipstick.

Adam: Yes. [laughs] I think that's...

Roger: Why would you want kiss-proof lipstick, really?

Adam: Yes. I just can't remember if there's anything else that I thought would be good to ask you about.

Roger: What was your first experience of seeing them? How did you come across the film originally?

Adam: I think it was because of the fact that it was a remake of Eyes Without a Face.

Roger: So did you just come across it in your work, or did you just chance across it?

Adam: I chanced across it because I was thinking about Eyes Without a Face.

Roger: Is there a [indecipherable 53:26]

Adam: It is an orphaned film. You can get in DVD without difficulty or on YouTube. You can download it because it doesn't seem to have any...and I quite like the fact that it's an orphaned film and that it's one of those films that isn't somebody's property in an overt way.

Roger: A silly question, the idea of the project came when you saw the film or you had the idea for the project and you knew that relatively early? Which way 'round is it?

Adam: I think the original thought was much more to do with the fact that I'd wanted originally to make a film which was a series of camera moves which would follow a score, so that being an idea for a while. And I tried various forms of that, particularly with dance.

And then this film I mentioned, which was video following people so that the choreography, if you like, with the camera was more or less dictated by the people and their movement.

And then I wanted overtly to have a very abstract. So I tried various things which was take a text and then you have certain letters would be, say, pan right if you saw an R and it would pan left if you saw a T and you just read the text and produce a choreography like that.

And in the end I was thinking about having a dramatic scene which would be not... it would be going on, and the camera would be just however behaving totally autonomously and it would move around. It would end up looking at things which were obviously, you could hear on the soundtrack.

You would hear that there was a domestic row going on, but actually you were looking at the cushion for some reason. And then it panned across to whatever. That started to intrigue me. And I thought "Well actually." And so that was the bit about having a soundtrack, where the camera didn't necessarily...

And then when it occurred to me watching a film that I started to notice out of focus backgrounds. And I'd first seen them and collected them for a while when I was in a film editing situation. Because if you have takes, often it will be somebody coming into frame and then leaving frame.

And if you use the shot of the person coming into frame and whatever, put it in your cutting copy, then when you rejoin your rushes you've got an empty frame and then a cut and an empty frame because you've used a bit in the middle, the supposedly interesting bit.

And it struck me that actually the out of focus background was often very beautiful. So I did think about making a thing called "Outtakes," which would be endless top and tails of shots where I'd either find reels that had been or recreate them deliberately.

And then it suddenly struck me that the backgrounds were very interesting. And I started watching films thinking about the backgrounds, and not the figures in the foreground.

Roger: Is it the film where Allais plays himself where he went to get, he got all the background shots.

Adam: Where those...

Roger: The landscapes.

Adam: ...scenes had been shot?

Roger: Yes, which was fascinating. When I was a teenager I used to love watching The Professionals, a trashy cop thing. And I've watched a few episodes of it again recently. And it's fascinating. All the landscapes are over the dock lands there and you could almost do the same film about the dock lands as easily, just all the landscape settings.

Adam: Yes.

Roger: It would be absolutely fascinating.

Adam: An episode of The Professionals with the actors removed.

Roger: Yes.

Adam: Recreated, just the soundtrack.

Roger: Yes. It would work quite well.

Adam: Brodie.

Roger: Bodie and Doyle.

Adam: Bodie and Doyle.

Roger: I think the main actor stopped it from being released for a long time because he felt it was too trashy and he is now a serious actor, I think.

Adam: He didn't realize that it was his greatest work.

Roger: Yes.

Adam: [inaudible 58:00]

Roger: Security film. It's only recently, relatively recently, it's been repeated.

Adam: In the age of boxed sets.

Roger: Because he didn't really want it to be shown anymore.

Adam: Well, I'm glad he relented. Yes, so anyway, that's why, broadly speaking.

Roger: You're right. It's the inconsidered moments that are supposedly...

Adam: The overlooked.

Roger: The overlooked.

Adam: And it seems to me, anyway, that if you have any intention as a... if you wanted to try and generalize and generalization is obviously so...an artistic purpose should be. And it seems to me invariably will involve somehow or another noticing something that is unnoticed and reframing that overlooked element.

And it seems to me that that's, broadly speaking, what anyone chooses to do.

Roger: Whatever happened to the mad scientist in films? They were a marvelous institution.

Adam: Well, in Almodovar.

Roger: Yeah, I suppose so.

Adam: He's back with a vengeance.

Roger: He's back, you're right, yeah.

Adam: Absolutely terrifying, marvelous in film, really.

Roger: Yeah, a lot of these plastic surgeons, there is something a bit demented about their craft and who they are.

Adam: There was the Cronenberg twins, twin doctors.

Roger: Yes, that's true.

Adam: They had rather...

Roger: And The Fly.

Adam: And The Fly is quite a remake of The Fly.

Roger: It's not as regular a feature now as it used to be.

Adam: No.

Roger: But they're a great cinematic invention, aren't they?

Adam: Well I suppose if they choose to remake, and the thing about horror is it's a land where remakes are frequently and freely undertaken. So it's absolutely expected that there should be remakes. So I think there will be a return.

But The Island of Dr. Moreau was remade, wasn't it, and that was a disaster.

Roger: Yes.

Adam: That character, that figure, because people said, the criticisms or the critiques of Franju's film are all about colonialist understanding, post-colonial perspective on the idea of...

Roger: Was it Franju who did Le Sang des Bêtes, as well?

Adam: Yeah. No.

Roger: No?

Adam: Yes, yes.

Roger: It's an amazing...

Adam: A few years before that, yeah.

Roger: It's an amazing film of this 1950s French abattoir.

Adam: Yes.

Roger: Quite extraordinary.

Adam: Horrific.

Roger: And again, there's a lot of flesh and carnage.

Adam: I think it's still quite shocking.

Roger: It's incredibly shocking. You very rarely see it in cinema verite.

Adam: I don't think too many people can take it. But nowadays, I don't know.

Roger: What next then?

Adam: I don't know. We'll see how this goes down. I did actually apply for funding a few times for it and the problem I had was describing what it was. And it never really quite seemed to be clear to anyone I applied to.

I described it to one funder as a vampire film shot entirely in a mirror because it was called Atom Age Vampire. I was trying to describe what you would expect and what you should see. That didn't kind of work.

Roger: [laughs]

Adam: I tried to describe it as a choreographic dance film and choreography for camera.

Roger: [laughs]

Adam: They didn't buy that.

Roger: No.

Adam: And in the end I thought I'd better just make it and then see what it was like. So anyway...

Roger: And did you already have the locations in mind when you made it?

Adam: Not really. I just knew that the locations had to be as similar as I could easily make them to the novel.

Roger: How did you find the house? Where is the house?

Adam: That's Louise's house.

Roger: So it's actually [indecipherable 1:02:26] comments about the wallpaper.

Adam: I loved the wallpaper.

Roger: [laughs]

Adam: In fact, that wallpaper and the Tri-X grainy film is to me the star of the film.

Man 2: [laughs]

Adam: I love it. And especially in the absence of faces, that form of human decoration, that gesture, that desire to decorate the cave wall, it has a pathos about it. People create these spaces. And I've always loved walking around houses when I've been left to my own devices if I'm staying somewhere.

There's always...

Roger: You're about! [laughs] Lock the drawers, the bedroom.

Adam: Yes, they lock their doors. But then it's one of the great pleasures as well of that awful television concept, come dine with me, is the time when the guests are just allowed to explore the house.

Roger: It's quite an extraordinary invasion.

Adam: Invasive, cruel, inexplicable that it should be such a hit. But then on the other hand...

Roger: That's because of the cruelty, I think.

Adam: Yes, and people open, with impunity, people's bottom drawers. What the hell do they expect to find? So I do think there is a little bit of that.

And there's also the other atmosphere in it that I think, I don't know about you, but when the first time you're left home alone as a child.

Roger: Yes. The first time I was left home alone, I foolishly started to watch a horror film. I was about 16. And I had to turn it off after about an hour.

Adam: Well that's quite late to be the very first time home alone.

Roger: No, no, I was home alone for a few days.

Adam: Oh, for a few days, even more.

Roger: Yes.

Adam: But that's a very particular thing. And that's your evocation of the pram and looking out. In a way, I think what you touched on there for me straightaway is that thing of the absent parent. And actually, I can't remember how old I was, but it was quite a profound experience.

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