

Subject, memory and place: Jill Daniels in conversation with Matthias Kispert

Jill Daniels

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Abstract

Jill Daniels' essay films *Not Reconciled* and *Breathing Still* were recently screened at a Hyphen Conversations event at the University of Westminster. *Not Reconciled*, located in Belchite in northern Spain, explores the trauma of the Spanish Civil War. The project emerged from her PhD research at the University of East London. In *Breathing Still*, Daniels' voiced flâneuse addresses the memory of Rosa Luxemburg as she roams Berlin's streets and the city's memorials while contemplating the rise of nationalisms past and present.

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Figure 2: Jill Daniels, Fire silhouette, Not Reconciled, 2011. Screenshot. Belchite. [use of courtesy of Jill Daniels]

Matthias Kispert: Thank you very much, Jill, for presenting and discussing your films in January this year and for agreeing to do this interview. To begin, talking about your practice as a filmmaker, you have quite a distinctive voice, but at the same time, in a film like *Not Reconciled*, for example, there are many different aesthetic strategies that are being pursued from straight-to-camera interviews to fictionalised characters to very observant footage. And I was interested in the whole process that goes into creating a work like that: the different stages, how you make the decisions of what kind of strategy to pursue when, etc.

Jill Daniels: First of all, thank you for inviting me to do this interview. And I think we should say that we are doing it virtually and we are in Covid-19 lockdown, and therefore this is a unique type of interview for me, and I am sure for you as well.

In terms of coming to the different strategies that I used, it came out of my previous work, really. I have been thinking about how to bring together ideas about the subject: the human subject, the historical subject, memory and place, which are my preoccupations, if you like; how to represent them, how to mediate them effectively without restriction. Because I was already making documentaries for quite a long time, somehow I felt there were constraints of conventions around cinematic language for documentary, maybe because I

had not been exposed to more experimental work in documentary, because I come from a fiction/art background in the first place. With documentary I felt I could not quite grapple with these constraints. My work very much has been into experimenting with how to bring together disparate topics, but more importantly, disparate filmic strategies. In other words, how could I make a film that was reflexive and self-reflexive and also explore those subjects that I have just talked about and bring them together, so there is some clarity and they inform each other, so that it is actually accessible. I think it comes back to the nature of genre in the history of cinema, this whole idea of how genre developed and the idea that documentaries are not really films, and that it is often said that documentary filmmakers when they make a feature film are making their first 'film'. In other words, the real film is the feature film that they make once they are established and famous as the documentary filmmaker, which I think is quite insulting, actually.

So that was the point when I was making *Not Reconciled* in 2009, but I think things have very much changed. In 2009 I was still grappling with that kind of acceptability of making film that was both about aesthetics and cinematic language and was also about a subject. All the films that I have made since are around doing that sort of project, if you like, and each has developed according to the subject that I have chosen.

MK: *Not Reconciled* and many of your works are excavating some kind of historic trauma in a certain place. I suppose this strategy of shifting registers works quite well, because those histories are always contested, so the form of the film itself deals with the subject matter as much as what is shown in the film. I also was wondering when you actually put this into practice, what sort of steps do you take? For example, for *Not Reconciled* you read some diaries of fighters in the civil war, you have obviously been to the place, and there must have been some back and forth between you doing research by yourself, you going and immersing yourself in the place, you going and editing, etc. How do these different steps play off each other?

JD: It is a very organic process for me. I have as a base the interest in trauma, issues to do with maybe my own background and events that have happened to me – experiences that I have had that drove me towards this question of the nature of identity, contested identity, trauma in history. And I was interested in the Spanish Civil War, my parents used to live in Spain, somebody told me about ruined villages in Spain, and so I went. And I think with every film that I have made, I am very interested in location and in not having too much preconception before I actually go to the place. I have a dialogue with what I find when I get there. So that was what I did in relation to Belchite in northern Spain, which was ruined in the civil war during a battle, and which is supposed to have mass graves. Mass grave excavation is very topical in Spain and not resolved because of the fact that people were murdered, executed, actually on both sides, but more on the Republican side, and that went on after the civil war ended. And this debate that has been going on about whether or not to excavate the graves and give people recognition of who they were is still not resolved in Spain. It has been resolved a little bit more than when I made the film, when I first made my visit to that village. What was interesting about the village and that location was that it was not heritagised in the way that some other places have been. It still is kind of, what is going to happen to that village, it has just been left, and there is hardly anybody there. So it was possible to think imaginatively, if I can say that, in relation to how one might represent it. But basically there is just a set of ruined buildings with another village with the same name, which is quite extraordinary really, built next door, built by Republican prisoners of war, basically in a concentration camp. The battle was in 1936, and they did not finish building the new village next door until 1954. So that was a very long process.

Having been there, the process that I took was to read about the battle and accounts of it, first-hand accounts and so on, to amass the idea of who was there. And then I came up with the idea of using those accounts as kind of signifiers, for developing characters, fictional characters who were fighters. One or two of the secondary characters do come from actual published texts. But the idea was to interact, they would interact with each other as ghosts because there was a mass grave there and bodies under the ruins.

MK: Did you already have the idea that you were going to work with fictional ghost characters when you went to Belchite?

JD: At the very beginning I didn't. I knew that I wanted to work with enactment and documentary realism, but I didn't know how I would do that. And I think that is the same in every film that I have made, that I don't know necessarily how the fictional side of it will be. I have never created completely fictional characters in that way in a documentary before, and I am not sure if I will again, but I have generally been using texts to create the idea of a character. But in *Not Reconciled*, the fact that they interact, they quarrel, and then they die again, they tell the story of their lives and the battle and everything else is a departure. But the fact that they are voices, they are not seen in front of the camera, that is really important. The spectator is asked to invent the idea of who these characters are in their imaginations rather than being able to see them. How that will be imagined depends on every single individual.

MK: As narrative devices to deal with this buried history, they are very effective. And also as devices that create this slippage in terms of how historic truth is produced, because there are many moments where we don't quite know whether the dialogue is directly quoted from the diaries or whether it is a fictionalised story. So it is very interesting in terms of how memory and history are constructed. I was also wondering, when you go to a place like this, which is probably quite a close-knit village, and you come there as a total outsider, what response do you get, and how do you see your own position in unearthing this traumatic history?

JD: I think this is the question of the outsider. In this particular instance, when you are doing something which is quite contested for the inhabitants, first, nobody lives in the ruins, but people come to the ruins; there are people living in the village next door. But it is a very quiet place, and I didn't really meet anybody in the village. There is no hotel, there are no shops, it is not a village in the sense that there is a community. There is a cafe there, and that was about it, and I talked to people there, and there are a couple of bars, but it is not a very accessible community. The people that I met were people in the streets, and I was asking these very basic questions. And I think because I was an outsider and didn't have a great command of Spanish, although I did speak to them in Spanish, and there were quite a lot of observational things I did, but they were not necessarily individuals who actually lived in Belchite itself. There was another village down the road called Lécera that had been Republican, whereas Belchite was taken over by the Nationalists. So that was quite interesting, but I don't go into that in particular. I was interested to do what were basically vox pops, you could say. Basically asking the same questions and seeing how people react. In that situation, I said I was making a film, and I was telling them what I did. But it was not that kind of interaction where if I was delving deep into their thoughts and feelings and emotions; there are ethical issues around that. I think the fact that I was a woman and the only people I took with me were also women, just one or two in the trips that I made. And people were very friendly; they knew that I was a foreigner, and I think that made it easier than if I had been Spanish, going in and talking to people. Apart from the old woman in the ruins, which was a very strange thing for me, because of how I met her. She was about 92, she told me when I

first met her by chance, and she asked me if she could show me around because she had lived in the village. And so she appears in the film, and she wanted to be in it. But she does not say anything about her life in the film. She did talk to me, but I did not put that in the film, actually. She became like a guide. And then, in fact, I could not find her again the next time I went, I don't know what happened. But there is a sequence with a girl, about whom one doesn't know who she was, in a red dress, you know, this metaphor of the red dress and revolution and so on, and I edited that and then cut directly in the next shot to the old woman still in the ruins.



Figure 1: Jill Daniels, *Girl in red dress, Not Reconciled*, 2011. Screenshot. Belchite. [courtesy of Jill Daniels]



Figure 2: Jill Daniels, Fire silhouette, Not Reconciled, 2011. Screenshot. Belchite. [courtesy of Jill Daniels]

MK: There are many visual metaphors in the film, very powerful ones. Another issue that I was thinking about relates to the position as an outsider, in that it is actually easier to get people to talk. I remember when we held the screening, there were some Spanish people in the audience who had a similar idea: it was mentioned that if they would go there, they feel that probably no one would even want to talk to them. But also, in the response from these audience members, the film seemed to trigger quite a nerve relating to unprocessed historical trauma or injustices. So I was wondering whether you think that your film has got an activist aspect and whether that was intentional? Because it relates to some parts of history that have not really been properly dealt with yet.

JD: Yes, there is a sequence at the end of a mass grave which has been excavated, and it is not in Belchite, it is in the north. I went there, it is very difficult to get there, because it is in the mountains. It was six trade unionists, and their remains were excavated and taken to Zaragoza to do their DNA, I guess, to try and identify who they were. I read about that, and I wanted to end the film by indicating specifically a mass grave, not just intimating it. And yes, I am definitely taking a position of not wanting to forget, but to remember. In a sense, it is an oblique activist film that takes you on that journey and then ends with the sadness, really, of the isolation in this big field surrounded by hills, where nothing was growing, and they just had these plastic flowers in jam jars to show where these six people had been thrown. For me this was very evocative. And that was why I went there to film.

Breathing Still from Jill Daniels on Vimeo.

MK: From the end of *Not Reconciled*, moving on to *Breathing Still* – the two films have got interesting linkages, for example, the character of Rosa. Rosa Luxemburg who is the subject of *Breathing Still* and who inspired the name of the protagonist in *Not Reconciled*; the fact that they both deal with historical trauma, historical violence, enacted on revolutionaries in the early twentieth century. *Breathing Still* has got a very personal tone; in *Not Reconciled* you have taken the approach of fictionalising history, whereas in *Breathing Still*, you have connected history to your own personal history as well. So I was wondering how these different approaches function differently for you.



Figure 3: Jill Daniels, Schöneberg boat, *Breathing Still*. 2018. Screenshot. Berlin. [courtesy of Jill Daniels]

JD: *Breathing Still* is part of a larger project. And it is important to say that, because I wanted to use the same methodology that I used in *Not Reconciled* and other films that I have made, of going to a place and responding to it with a preconceived idea about excavating history. *Breathing Still* was quite a spontaneous response. I was in Berlin, and it was a sort of sketch in a sense, in that it consists virtually entirely of stills. Although when I said it is a sketch, I have actually made a second version called *Breathing Still 2020*, which has an additional two minutes, and that also has the anniversary of the death of Rosa Luxemburg, of her murder's centenary, for which I went back to Berlin to film. I made stills from the footage, and it ends *Breathing Still 2020*. But also I thought this is such an apposite title for what we are in at the moment. It is like we are breathing still somehow, even though there is this pandemic. That was a complete coincidence.

I was interested in the idea of the accumulation of footage. I have been working around the idea of found footage and reworking my own films as found footage. So I started with stills because that was what I had when I went to Berlin. It was at the time when the general election was being held. There were these extraordinary large posters of politicians, some of which were from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). My interest is around nationalism and anti-nationalism, and that is how Rosa Luxemburg became central to

my project, looking back at resistance that took place. That is the film that I am working on at the moment, called *Resisters*, maybe this is the working title, I don't know yet. It is about people who were resisting Nazism as it was growing, and they died, but I didn't want to portray them as victims. In *Breathing Still*, the first film, it is about the victims as well and how that arose, the development of the Freikorps in Luxemburg's time, who were the precursors to the growth of the militant arm that helped fascism get into power. So that is what I am working on, combining and thinking about enactment, and also, yes, bringing myself in directly, the autobiographical aspect to it. It is very much work in progress.



Figure 4: Jill Daniels, *Stolperstein*, *Breathing Still*, 2018. Screenshot. [use of courtesy of Jill Daniels]

MK: In the new project *Resisters*, what sort of strategies are you applying? You mentioned reworking materials, using found footage, there already is observational footage and your photographs in *Breathing Still*, and a self-reflective voice. But also then sometimes in *Breathing Still* these little journeys happen, like when you see the *Stolpersteine* [brass plates on the pavement in Germany commemorating victims of Nazi persecution], and then it is almost like the film stops, and you really give yourself time to meditate on what you actually just encountered. So you already have a few methods there.

JD: Yes, the *Stolpersteine* basically give the biography of the person and what happened to them. That is the last known address of these people, and the *Stolpersteine* I use in the film are all in Berlin. One of those that I included in *Breathing Still* will also be in *Resisters*. It commemorates a person who refused to wear the yellow star. He was Jewish and that was his stand, which led to his death. The others did various things, but that methodology of documenting those stones and the houses these people lived in, and the areas that they lived in and how they've changed is common to all of them. I don't know how I am going to work on the enactment side of it yet. I am still researching the biographies of the people and thinking about how I am going to deal with them, there are about six or seven of them. And then the other strand is this organisation called Grandmothers Against the Right, *Omas gegen Rechts*, who are older women who have grown into a real network of anti-nationalist women over the last maybe three or four years. They have got groups all

through Germany, and now they want to grow outside, because of the AfD, right-wing nationalists, they are not actually Nazis; there is another party who are Nazis in Germany. But they are now the main opposition in the parliament in Germany, so I think there is a real danger with them. I have been collecting footage for the last couple of years around those women and what they are doing. And I filmed one of their group discussions, where it was clear that there is a tension between all the other issues that are going on, whether or not it should still be a single-issue campaign against nationalism. Some people were saying it should be about climate change, and other issues are to do with the divisions between East and West, which still seem to be quite prevalent, that kind of history. So this is going to be a biggish film, I am not quite sure yet, but I have shot it and I am about to edit it.

MK: It sounds very promising already, the way that you have discovered these traces of history that have been put on the ground in the paving stones in Berlin, and then you expand outwards from that into the contemporary resistance and movements that are happening. So maybe this is a good note to end on. Thank you very much for your time, it was great to talk to you.

JD: Thank you, it was a pleasure.

About the author

Dr Jill Daniels is a filmmaker and academic currently teaching at the University of East London. She is an alumna of the Royal College of Art. Her film practice explores memory and history, place and subjectivities. Website: www.jilldanielsfilms.com. Matthias Kispert is an artist and PhD researcher at CREAM, University of Westminster, and is the Editor-in-Chief of *Hyphen Journal Issue 2*.