**When did you know you wanted to be a photographer? Was there a defining moment?**

I suppose there was a moment where I recognised that photography was quite special and something really sank in for me when I saw Chris Killip’s work. I saw that book ‘In Flagrante’ in the early 80s, I was about 19. I had already been to art school in a sort of pre-foundation course and nothing really gripped me. I just didn’t relate to anyone there, it was lecturers that knew so much about art and were talking about stuff I had no knowledge about. So I didn’t identify with any of it. I had basically gone there because I had been in a pretty remedial class at school and I probably would have ended up just getting a job straight out of school. But it was Thatcher’s Britain at that point, with three million unemployed and I was one of them. So I ended up going to this college and not really getting any of it for a couple of years. Then coming away I ended up on the dole and then started going to this dark room workshop that was in my town. There were a lot of old men there who were amateur photographers who had cameras and were using the dark room, having fun with photography. I was the only young person there. I remember this guy at the time showing me this Chris Killip book and just being blown away by it. And that’s when I knew I could access those kinds of pictures because I came from that kind of background. And that maybe you could take pictures of your friends, which then could be looked on as art. That’s when I realised photography isn’t just a functional thing, like for weddings. It can actually be seen as art. And it was more the everyday kind of thing. I could see like these kind of romantic black and white photographers coming out of Paris because they were kind of ubiquitous images really. You see these pictures everywhere on postcards and posters, but I couldn’t relate to those pictures because people were dressed in 1940s/50s clothes and they were doing romantic kisses under the Eiffel Tower. Great images, but they just didn’t have any impact on me because it wasn’t my life, it wasn’t seen as recorded. And the second I saw Chris Killip’s work I was just like ‘oh wow ok.’

**What important lessons have you learnt throughout your career, especially when you started?**

Oh there are millions of them, where to start? I think through doing photography and film you’ve got to have a bullshit detector. Well I have to have a bullshit detector; I’m not saying anyone else has to. But for what I’m seeing in the images, I want to see that someone is engaging something and they’re not self-conscious about being photographed or being on film. And I think when I spot that in other people’s pictures, it makes me go “oh right they don’t have the same premise as I have; they don’t have the same goal”. It doesn’t make me go “that’s wrong” because a lot of photography is about people being very conscious and striking a certain look or pose especially in fashion. For me it’s all about finding the right people, like casting the right people in photographs or film who will forget they are being photographed and engage in something. So when you look at that image you don’t go “look at that person posing”, you go “that person is lost in that moment”. And that for me, I keep relearning this lesson throughout my career because there are so many different ways of people faking this thing to you, that they can do this when they get on the set and you have to try and spot these little way of hiding things. Or giving the right direction in the casting so you suss out if someone is able to do that. I think more than anything, when you are photographing someone or you’re shooting them in a film, the people that make the best models and actors, are the people who have the biggest imaginations and are the most brave. So they are not running across a field going “I have to be careful I don’t want that side of my face in”, they are thinking “I’m in this moment, I’m winning this race”. I’ve had to argue so many times, with so many fashion directors and editors over the years about why I won’t use this model because they can not get into that imagination zone, they can’t make that leap because they are too worried about looking ugly.

**Can you tell us a bit about your photography/work process and how you approach a project?**

Yeah I think that a lot of stuff that I do is semi-autobiographical. I don’t know if anyone does this or not, I hate the thought that anyone would do it. But the idea of going to a fashion show and then saying “oh I’m inspired by that collection” to say do pictures with strong lighting, because that’s not where my starting point comes from. I mean there are some great photographers that do that, and do it well, however it’s not my way of working. For me a shoot starts with character, and then it builds there. Then we find clothes that will illustrate that character and I always manage to see stylists that would complement that idea, their reason for styling is the same reason for what I’m doing, we share cultural references. We then go to work out what world that person would be in. What parts of that world we would edit down to demonstrate an idea, or a story, or a lifestyle for a better word. Then everything else would get dictated by that initial thought of who is that character?

**Do you think the profession of a photographer goes hand in hand with directing and filmmaking?**

I don’t know really, I suppose it depends on the way people work. For my sort of working process it starts with working out this character. I am involved with figuring out this person. As a fashion photographer, you have to think of characters and stories, ideas of how to execute that story and writing a screenplay, whether it’s a short film or a feature is that very thing. And then executing it in moving image with voices is even more compelling for me.

**How was going from photographing a single moment to capturing and filming one that develops over time?**

Obviously it was natural; it just felt like a natural process really. I mean, it’s fun to work on something over a long period with the right subject matter because you are passionate about it. I can imagine if you are doing a big commercial franchise film it would take a few years and be difficult to do when being told what to do all the time. I’m not sure that would be fun, I’m yet to experience that. But my experience was great, I never planned for Northern Soul to take 15 years, it just happened that way. We didn’t get the funding when we wanted it so all those things that conspired against it, made it a stronger film in the end.

**What process did you take when getting funding to make Northern Soul? Do you have any advice on the subject of funding for creative projects?**

I guess you can get any kind of public funds that are available. I didn’t get them and did end up putting everything I had into it, which is a very stupid thing to do. I knew the risks; you are always pulled in different directions. As a film maker you want to make something interesting, you want to make it you; you want to make it your way. But then when the money comes into the equation, you can’t do that if it’s somebody else’s money. So it is how you manage that, if you actually get that money. It is tricky, I would advise anyone to kickstart their project and finance independently. I don’t think to be doing your first feature or short film you need to be able to be told what to do, because you can’t develop that way.

**With your film Northern Soul, do you think it romanticizes the era or is a good depiction of the reality of it?**

I wanted to make a film about northern soul because it’s what I know and what I love. I felt it would make a very good subject matter for the screen. But then there is also this idea that I wanted to make a film in its own right regardless of my experience of that role. I wanted it to be the kind of film I would like to watch. The kind of films I would like to watch are the kitchen sink films of the sixties/fifties and a lot of foreign films from that period about realism. I somehow wanted to put that ethos into it as well, coming from a working class prospective. So having experienced that myself, I knew it was a special time. Now I’m not saying that in a romantic way, I’m saying it in a way that for the first time working class kids were doing something that was independent to what had been mapped out for them in previous generations. And in order to make that story deliver, it couldn’t be a fully kitchen sink genre. Because I think the protagonist in kitchen sink films are at odds with their environment and have an ideal (this is certainly the case of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning), and this has been crushed, they have to fall into place and do what has been mapped out for them. They have no power, so they are victims of their circumstances. And I think my generation probably was one of the first working class northern generations who shaped a little bit of their own future, regardless of whether that was a frivolous activity. We got out of our hometowns, we had wheels and we had somewhere to go beyond our local working men’s club. We didn’t want to get drunk, we wanted to stay sharp. So as protagonists of my film they weren’t victims of the circumstance, which is kind of why this film didn’t appeal to the people of the film industry. This film literally got rejected across the board, by festivals, by funders and by distributors. We only had one offer on the table at the end of this journey. I think that there is something about that message that is maybe not something that is appealing to certain people. That there was a generation of working class kids that did their own thing and weren’t victims. That is how I wanted to say it through that film. It’s an interesting way of seeing working class kids without it being a kind of romcom or a comedy drama, because I don’t think it is that. And I always wanted to deliver that message; I didn’t want it to be anything other than that.

**What are you working on currently, any exciting projects in the pipeline?**

I don’t really want to explain fully because I don’t want to jinx it, then it doesn’t happen. But I am writing, I just finished the first draft on a screen play about photography. So hopefully I can get somebody to produce this film and back it for me, rather than backing it myself again which I can’t do. Everything is depleted now; it’s not even a possibility for me to back a film now. I think that if I can get this next film out, I will be happy. I’m flying now, I know what I want to do, I know who I want to portray. I don’t know if it’s going to be any good, but it’s something that I feel compelled to do.

**Do you have any advice for the students at Leeds College of Art who are about to embark on their own creative career paths?**

On one hand you want to tell people good advice that means getting a job, on the other hand you want to give people the advice to just do their own thing, which may stop them from getting a job. It’s whether or not you want to be a creative person who defines their own future and their own goals, takes that risk and becomes freelance. Or you go into the industry, something you pick up for a while and try do your own work through that, I don’t know. It’s hard, but what I have to say from my own perspective is to just stick to your guns. If you want to have a career where you work as some kind of artist where you are commissioned by interesting people with interesting projects to work on, then you should stick to your own thing and not look at what other people are doing. Know the history of the medium that you work in, in order to create something new. And just stick to your guns, if you think you’ve got a voice, then don’t listen to others, just get on with it because everyone is going to tell you not to do something if they don’t understand it. But I have been very stubborn and embrace what I think is good, which has worked out for me so far.