



**58°34'09" N, 4°45'45" W**

### **Chris Darke**

We start out airborne, in black and white. The land below is papery, glacial. Among the sparse lines of roads and fields, a lone settlement appears as a fossil engraved in the earth. A loch spreads like spilt ink. Clouds obscure the view as we make our descent through the rising wind. Grounded now, we face a window whose frame forms a peeling crucifix. A young girl within prepares a lantern and looks back at us; she will be our guide and we follow as she carries her lantern to the window, which she opens and climbs out into the dusk. She is a threshold-child, on the cusp of adulthood, living where the land meets the sea at the northernmost edge of the British Isles, between the worlds of her settler family and the surrounding presence of the army. The window is her emblem, a vitreous membrane at which she will frequently be framed, and she leads us from the warm light of home, past rows of identical military buildings, to an abandoned barracks where she peers into another unlit pane. Fade to black, and we are airborne again, hovering like a bird of prey.

The first five-and-a-half minutes of Shona Illingworth's film *Balnakiel* establish its main subjects – landscape, weather, spirit of place – and the perspectives from which it will examine its eponymous location. The unnamed girl embodies a terrestrial point of view that is set against a disembodied aerial perspective, which recurs five times, shot in black and white from different altitudes. In cutting between these prospects, the film announces its intention to be both a portrait of a place and a map of the space that encompasses it. Between the antithetical modes of portraiture and mapping, with their respective associations of detail and specificity, distance and abstraction, the film delineates its spatial axis of

above and below. Let us deal with place first; specifically, the wind-blown, out-of-the-way place of Balnakiel designated by the coordinates given above and whose name means ‘place of the church’ in Gaelic. When Gertrude Stein revisited her childhood hometown, she famously observed ‘there is no there there’, which was perhaps only to restate the truism ‘we can’t go home again’. On returning to Balnakiel, where she lived between the ages of two and sixteen, Illingworth finds ‘there’ to be exorbitantly there, multiple, proliferate, and nested around the ‘here’ of her childhood home. Although *Balnakiel* is not a wistful return to old haunts and goes beyond documenting a pilgrimage of the heart, it is nevertheless useful to describe some of the geographical and historical features of its isolated location.

Enclosed by a mountain range and facing the Atlantic, the village lies at the east corner of Balnakiel Bay in the Scottish Highlands. The drama of the elements is performed with coastal ferocity here, sea and sky clashing over the earth, oblivious to the humans sheltering in their rain-lashed dwellings. Other powerful forces also meet against this backdrop and it is these that interest Illingworth, for the marks they have left on the landscape and in the way Balnakiel is itself the nexus of an unusual convergence of histories. The barrenness of the terrain is as much the work of man as nature, testament to the Highland Clearances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which land was cleared for agricultural purposes and the inhabitants expelled to the coast and beyond in a Gaelic diaspora extending as far as America and Australia. This ruthless combination of social engineering and ethnic cleansing was carried out in the name of ‘improvement’ and evidence of it still remains in the ruined crofts around the neighbouring village of Durness. Balnakiel, then, is situated in a place of hostile climate and ancient grievances, with a history of incursions and displacement, the memory of which permeates the landscape.

Like the Gaels before – who named one particularly germane promontory Faraid Head (‘place of watch’) – the Ministry of Defence knew a good place for an observation post when they saw it and the area is now the site of a military watch station. This inheritance dates back to the Second World War, when the Home Chain Command was established as a coastal defence watch, the army’s arrival opening Durness up to outsiders. During the Cold War, Home Chain Command sites, including Durness, became early warning systems and Balnakiel was built in the 1950s as part of the upgrading of Durness to house a radar station, which was

soon obsolete. It was here that the artist grew up and the autobiographical background to *Balnakiel* is worth setting out, if only to indicate the peculiar specificity of the place at the heart of her film. Illingworth was a child of a new influx of incomers to the area, artists and craftspeople who, in the refusenik spirit of the 1960s, turned their back on urban living and gravitated to this isolated outpost of Bohemia. A small contingent of idealists, only fifty strong at first, was invited to take advantage of the large work spaces offered at a small rent in former military premises; a number of squat, utilitarian Nissan huts were duly adapted into homes and studios by the new tenants and in 1964 the Balnakiel Craft Village was established. With its Presbyterian natives, the military's lingering presence and the recently arrived contingent of artists, Balnakiel contained an odd juxtaposition of communities, all the more marked by the setting's isolation. As Illingworth puts it, 'for the locals, this area is the centre of the world, for the military it was the front line, and for the "incomers" it is the edge of world.'<sup>1</sup> An unwelcoming edge at times, the locals expressing hostility towards the potters and painters, who they dubbed 'white settlers', a term of abuse used for incomers during the clearances.

*Balnakiel* is the most ambitious film Illingworth has made since she began producing video and sound installations in the early 1990s and its formal and thematic elements can be usefully related to the artist's other works. Consider sound, for instance, which plays a crucial role in her installations but never simply as a straightforward illustration of the image, an approach that is also evident in the sound-world of *Balnakiel*. An ominous, ambient thrumming resonates throughout the film, between a quasi-hypnotic drone and a sonic substratum on which other sounds are layered, and which features in many of her other works. Then there is her use of fragments of dialogue, an aspect of her approach to sound encapsulated by the three-screen installation *Passing* (2001) – which shifts between macro- and micro-views of a city, juxtaposing an aerial panorama of urban sprawl with shots of a pavement busy with passing feet – in the disembodied words of a woman: 'you hear people's voices but you don't know where they're coming from.' So it is in *Balnakiel*; the voices we hear are not assigned to specific speakers, words are unmatched to faces, instead we receive shreds of unattributable sentences that add new dimensions to the image. This approach does not aim to contextualise the image through sound, subordinating one to the other in a conventional hierarchy of

meaning, but situates each as an element among others, creating meaning through a process of accretion and association.

A pair of pointed examples occurs in a sequence eleven minutes into the film. Over shots of the bay taken from the military watch tower, two voices compete for our attention: a soldier gives directions as part of the exercise underway and an unidentified male voice describes an experience he can only convey in physical terms, as something felt in the ‘stomach and chest, like being breathless with your heart pounding at the same time, and feeling sick ...’. The anonymous military voice, talking of ‘target areas’ and coordinates, cuts across him momentarily, then the other voice resumes, musing that ‘the crazy thing is, not once was there ever an incident for me to fear walking through the village.’ There is a clash of registers between the clipped military technicalities and the more allusive language used by the other speaker, which is emphasised by one voice interrupting the other, and the source of the sensations evoked remains ambiguous. Is this a fighter pilot telling what it feels like to land after a high-speed aerial manoeuvre or a villager describing his fear of the jets screaming overhead? This decision not to spell things out is part of the work’s wider aim to make space palpable through sound, and to supplement the spatial axis of above and below with the corporeal dimensions of inside and outside; space is conceived as being like a vessel containing volume and depth and experienced as a felt verticality<sup>ii</sup>. Another interplay of sound and image immediately follows to extend the idea: to the rotary thump of a helicopter’s blades, the girl is shown spinning herself dizzy and the camera whirls around with her, the image picking up the motion suggested by the sound. Both moments describe bodies in the process of internalising the military presence around them, the sounds of fighter jets and helicopters being embodied as physically oppressive sensations.

Illingworth’s work often feels like it is exploring the idea of an aftermath in which the dimensions of past and present are evoked rather than reconstructed, the ripples and shockwaves of memory measured in seismographic combinations of image and sound. Memory is sometimes related to particular places or sites in states of abandonment or dereliction, such as in *Bare Dust* (2000), a ten-minute video and sound projection made as part of a public art project filmed on the Trowbridge Estate in East London. The film juxtaposes footage of the estate’s tower blocks being demolished with shots of the football-playing feet of local children as they dribble

and pass on the remaining wasteland (Illingworth returns obsessively to shots of feet on the ground in her work as a kind of ‘ground zero’ image on which to layer and stack other spatial evocations) over which we hear the children fantasising about becoming professional footballers. Though few may mourn the demise of the concrete dream of civic modernism embodied by the Trowbridge tower blocks, the aspiration to celebrity that has come to replace it as a collective future-oriented dream appears cruelly insubstantial in comparison, as one lucid youngster acknowledges: ‘you know it’s not going to happen to you but you’ve still got that little bit of doubt in your head’. Similarly, *Untitled (Elin)* (2003) populates the disused Greenwich Hospital with the voices of women from a nearby housing estate whose recollections haunt this institutional space with memories of childbirth as the camera tracks in disembodied motion through deserted corridors, wards and operating theatres<sup>iii</sup>.

Memory is broached in other works as the traumatic return of suppressed experience, particularly in the installation *The Watch Man* (2007, made in collaboration with neuro-psychologist Dr. Martin A. Conway) which is partly a portrait of the artist’s father who was eighty years old when the piece was made and relates his memory of serving during the Second World War. One often hears of returning combatants who were reticent to discuss their experiences, shutting them up inside themselves for years, and while this is often lazily attributed to English emotional reserve what is less well known is the widespread coldness and indifference that many demobbed British soldiers encountered on coming home<sup>iv</sup>. David Illingworth acknowledges this in his daughter’s powerful, affecting work when he says, ‘people didn’t want to know, they didn’t want to hear. You’re shunned. “You’re a survivor, damn you”.’ Illingworth’s suppression of his wartime experiences manifested itself physically in debilitating sensations of suffocation which the work details in his words, combined with his descriptions of an especially traumatic event in which he participated: the liberation of the Nazi extermination camps. *The Watch Man*, though, is allusive; the artist does not identify the subject of her portrait as her father, nor does she specify the atrocity to which he was a witness. Instead, we see an unnamed old man engaged in everyday tasks, brewing tea, making food, or engrossed in his work of repairing timepieces, and taking a shower – footage that Illingworth’s camera lingers on lovingly, eliciting a tremendous sense of pathos and vulnerability but also a suggestion of raw horror

that inevitably arises when the spectacle of showering is associated with the memory of the death camps. It is fair to say that these images (projected onto an elevated lens-shaped circular screen) are only an element in a work that aimed to immerse visitors in its sound-world through its installation form in which sound both moves under the viewer's feet across a specially constructed luminous red floor acting as a speaker and emanates from above the viewer's head. The installation format can explore the relationship between image and sound by expanding it into a three-dimensional space where it becomes a physically immersive experience and, in *The Watch Man*, Illingworth does just this – the lens-shaped screen is a symbol of magnification, the motif of the work's play with scale that is also taken up in the echo and resonance of sound in space.

*Balnakiel* cannot be properly described as an installation work, although it is indeed exhibited as part of an installation that includes other elements relating to the work (paintings, drawings, photographs), it is more fitting to examine it in terms of how the three dimensional physicality of the installation format is absorbed into two-dimensional form in *filmic* terms. One of the strikingly filmic aspects of *Balnakiel* can be unpacked with reference to the great French film critic Serge Daney, whose work is sadly too little known to English-speakers. In a series of influential texts written shortly before his death in 1992, Daney distinguished between what he termed 'the visual' (*le visuel*) and 'the image', designating the different relationships between spectator and image created by the mass media and cinema respectively. This distinction testifies to Daney's background as a cinephile critic who, with over twenty year's experience on *Cahiers du cinéma*, also wrote on television and mass media for the French daily *Libération* from the early 1980s. In this journalistic capacity he wrote a 'chronicle' in 1991 detailing his responses to television coverage of the first Gulf War in which the language of cinematic space is central to his distinction between 'the visual' and 'the image':

The visual [...] is the optical verification that things are functioning on a purely technical level: there are no reverse shots, nothing is missing, everything is sealed in a closed circuit, rather like the pornographic spectacle which is no more than the ecstatic verification that the organs are functioning. As for the image, this image that we have loved in cinema to the point of obscenity, the opposite would be true. *The image always occurs on*

*the border between two force fields*; its purpose is to testify to a certain alterity, and although the core is always there, something is always missing. The image is always more and less than itself.<sup>v</sup>

If one understands the properly filmic image as including sound, Daney's concept of 'the image' (as opposed to the merely 'visual') as existing on 'the border between two force fields' applies productively to Illingworth's work, and especially to *Balnakiel*, with its creation of 'force-fields' *between* image and sound. One might go further, describing her installations as being carefully assembled instruments for measuring memory, echo-chambers tuned to time's resonance in space, where the force-field exists between past and present, between memory – either of specific events or as emanating from particular places – and its subsequent triggers.

Balnakiel remains a site for military exercises, its combination of mountainous terrain and rugged open ground standing in for a number of other combat theatres: the troop manoeuvres depicted in the film were being undertaken as part of training before deployment to Iraq. *Balnakiel* concludes with footage of a bombing run using live armaments – a rocky islet off the coast exploding silently before our eyes. Can you feel it?

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<sup>i</sup> From an audio interview with the artist on the Film and Video Umbrella website: <http://www.fvu.co.uk/media/balnakiel-audio-excerpt-shona-illingworth-in-conversation/>

<sup>ii</sup> The term 'verticality' derives from the ground-breaking work of the Israeli architect and theorist Eyal Weizman who uses it to describe the 'geometry of occupation' imposed by Israel on the Occupied Territories as a form of spatial domination exercised from above, below and all around. See: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/eyal-weizman>, and Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (Verso, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> The use of camera movement and setting are striking in their evocation of work by French new wave filmmakers Alain Resnais and Jean-Daniel Pollet. Pollet's remarkable documentary-essay *L'ordre* (1974), in which the camera roams through a Greek leper colony, was informed by Resnais's treatment of sites and structures as repositories of memory, such as the Nazi death camps in *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955), the Bibliothèque Nationale in *Toute la mémoire du monde* (*All the Memory of the World*, 1956) and a Japanese hospital in the opening sequences of *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959). Resnais's oeuvre is central to recent studies of film in terms of 'trauma theory'; for an indicative treatment, see Emma Wilson, *Alain Resnais* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

<sup>iv</sup> This little examined history is explored in *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* by Alan Allport (Yale, 2009).

<sup>v</sup> Serge Daney, 'Montage Obligé: La guerre, la golfe et le petit écran', in *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sac à main*, (Lyon: Aléas Editeur, 1991), (p. 192). (Author's translation. Emphasis added.)