

His brilliant career

How did Nicolas Roeg go from lowly cameraman to the legendary director of *Don't Look Now*, *Performance* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*? In a rare interview, he tells all to Jason Wood.

Friday June 3, 2005 The Guardian

Jason Wood: Good evening ladies and gentlemen. As you may have guessed, I'm not Nick Broomfield - I don't have his good looks or his charm. Nick is working on a new film and asked me to step in at the last minute, and I was absolutely delighted. I grew up with this man's film posters on my walls - and I still have one of them - and I think he's responsible for, at a conservative estimate, four or five of the greatest films ever made. So you'll have to forgive my unbridled, boyish enthusiasm tonight when I present to you Nicolas Roeg.

Nicolas Roeg: I'd like to know which of the posters you destroyed.

JW: Actually I sold them and did rather well out of it, I must say. Let's begin by talking a little bit about your passion for cinema, and how you originally became interested in cinema and started working in it, because you have a very long history in it.

NR: Well, in the words of Star Wars, it was a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. I knew nothing about the cinema. When I went to the cinema as a boy, when I saw a war film, I thought the general was the star, and that Cary Grant was an extra. I had no idea about the structure of film, but I loved going to the cinema. I'd go with my sister, who loved to see them twice - it was continuous performance, in those days. Film and the cinema in England at that time was not thought of as it is now. It was not one of the arts - it was the movies.

Many years later, I sat on a censorship committee and I said, they've just stopped censorship for the theatre - Lord Chamberlain's office had just finished - so why are we discussing it for film? And one of the people in the committee - I won't say who it was, but a politician said, "You must understand, the theatre is a mandarin tradition in England." What do you mean by that? He said, "Anybody can just walk into cinema, but in theatre, you make a conscious effort and it's part of the culture". When I started, I'd tell my girlfriends' mothers that I was studying to be a lawyer or something in the city, in business. It was somehow shameful to be in the film business.

There were no film schools or anything, so I got a job with a man who owned a little studio that had been making war films, documentaries and things. So I started making tea for people who were doing these semi-documentaries after the war. And I discovered things. I thought this is a fantastic thing - it wasn't known to me then, it was a very secret affair. Now everything is known; they do documentaries about how things are done, all these special effects and things. Then it was a tremendously exciting mystery, just to be around it. I didn't know anything about who was the boss on the set, or what was happening, but it was extraordinary.

JW: Did you feel like you'd entered a magical world?

NR: It was just that. Gradually, I got a job in a cutting room. There wasn't a union then - I think I was No 18 in the ACT. There was an editor, Gladys Brimpts; her husband started the union. Terrific, I suddenly thought this is more than writing. I just couldn't understand why people didn't think this was one of the most wonderful things in the world. In the lunch hours, in Wardour street, we'd run films backwards and forwards, make a man sit on his head, fall down, get up ... It was fantastic, the ability to do that. It was a place with linguists, De Lane Lea, where they dubbed French films into English, and I saw masses of films. It fascinates me now that film has become a university subject; I can't believe it.

It rather shattered me today when I went to see Eric Fellner's talk - it was fascinating, and he's probably one of the most successful producers right now in England. He talked about how his films are ordered and structured and market researched. In my day - and I was lucky that way - it was still a showman's place, a walk-right-up kind of thing. There was something vagabond-like about it, at the same time it was growing secretly. And the idea of photography as an art was ridiculous. But that was my life, in a factory setting.

After De Lane Lea, through Gladys, I got a job at MGM, who had a studio here at Borehamwood. I went to see the chief loader and was introduced to Freddy Young, who was the chief cameraman; brilliant Freddy, who got two or three Oscars. Going with the chief loader onto the floor, I just thought everything was fantastic. Everything was being revealed; there were no books, no information - certainly not in England; but there was a bit more information in France, Germany and America, which had a tremendous history of film as art. Here in England, with the war, it was all documentaries and propaganda films, but film hadn't emerged as a whole other discipline of the arts. Children's finger-painting came under the arts, but movies didn't.

JW: Was it through working with Freddy Young that you decided that cinematography was going to be your next discipline, which you went on to have a long and distinguished career in?

NR: I had no idea about photography. I didn't think, "Ooh, I must be a photographer". I thought it was about loading magazines of film, standing around on set, then going back to the loading room. I stayed at MGM for about two years, and in that time I became part of the camera crew and worked my way up to be a focus puller.

I worked with a man called Joe Ruttenberg, a great American cinematographer, who gave me the best tip in the world - it was amazing, just a simple thing. This was the man who had photographed *The Philadelphia Story* and *Gigi*. I told him that I was thinking of taking a photographic course, and he said, "Just stay on the set and watch and be a part of it; anything you want to know, I'll tell you". He was talking one day to Dick Thorpe, the director, and he said, "Cinematography is completely different from photography. You're never going to win the Royal Photographic Society award, and don't try to do that. It's the scene that must be served".

You make the movie through the cinematography - it sounds quite a simple idea, but it was like a huge revelation to me. Curiously, it sank for a while when video and commercials came in. Because they had very little story to tell and they just had one thing to sell, they could have magnificent photography but not great cinematography. So quite

a lot of people who've come into cinema from the commercials world have had to learn the very fact of what cinematography is over again.

I was shooting Doctor Zhivago, and someone from MGM said to me, you only need one more shot to get the Oscar for this. Oscars are won with two or three shots only, because if it's really beautifully photographed, you don't really notice it until the astounding moment emphasises it. So I gradually learnt that, and became an operator and a cinematographer. It wasn't through a love of photography, but rather through my love of film, and the telling of stories through film. And later I thought, I can't think how anyone can become a director without learning the craft of cinematography. I was very glad later when I was directing that I wasn't in the hands of a cinematographer and hoping that he would do it well. I would know what he was doing, and we could discuss how that scene would look. It was just lucky in a way that I didn't go to film school and just learnt all this on the floor.

JW: Did you work with directors who were influential upon you? I know that you hold Truffaut and his Fahrenheit 451 in very high regard, and also Roger Corman's The Mask of the Red Death, which we see very clearly in Don't Look Now. Were there people you think you learnt from, that you still would cite as an influence?

NR: Of course. In life, we all learn from everyone. But if you like and admire someone tremendously, perhaps because they think the way you do, or like the way you think, then inevitably you do. With Francois, I liked his attitude in life. The rules of film-making can be taught in five minutes; that was what Orson Welles was told. The rules are learnt in order to be broken, but if you don't know them, then something is missing.

Francois had his thoughts and his attitude in life was very special. One thing I did learn from him: he told me, "I always like going into the projection box on the first night - mostly because I don't like to sit in the audience to see what they're feeling. But also because I like to watch the back of their heads - I can tell more about how they like it from there than if I sit among them". And I've done that many times - and from there I sometimes think, "What's wrong with you there in the third row?"

JW: I believe that you acted as cinematographer in your first two films, but one of the defining characteristics of your work, apart from them looking fantastic, is that they've also been edited very well. Your approach of using these mosaic-like montages and these elliptical details which become very important later on has become very influential. I just wondered if you could talk a bit about that because I was at the NFT interview with Steven Soderbergh, and he basically admitted that he'd taken the love scene in Don't Look Now and replicated it for Out of Sight. I've often heard film-makers talk about your influence on their editing approach - are you aware of this influence?

NR: The construction of the story is gigantic. I shoot a lot of film, a lot of scenes. In fact, one of my editors is here tonight - Tony Lawson, who's just fantastic; applaud him please because he's just brilliant. Some people are very lucky, and have the story in their heads. I've never storyboarded anything. I like the idea of chance. What makes God laugh is people who make plans.

If we're supposed to head for the beach to shoot a scene where a pair of lovers are taking leave of each other, and she gets up and walks off into the sunset, and they pass some

other happier people on the beach; but if when we arrive there and it's raining, the assistant director would say, "I know, get the camera out". Because that chance is telling you something. They'd planned to say goodbye on the beach, it's raining, and there's nobody on the beach. There's a fourth hand, telling you something better.

Years ago I had a house in Sussex, it was like Arcadia, with an old Victorian bridge, a pond and the Downs. There was a village watercolour society and they'd come and paint in my field. I watched them from the window, the way they would struggle this way and that to find the perfect moment. God has made every angle on that beautiful, and I felt that tremendously.

I was listening to Philip Pullman, talking about how he constructs the storyline - with me, I can't get out of the fact that it's chance. That's why I shoot a lot. Afterwards in the editing process, with the loads of material, you live the film again. You shoot the bookcase to see what the characters have been reading. Maybe the scene calls for the person to lose attention for a moment and glance away at something, because our attention is never singularly focussed; we drift.

JW: It's good that you mentioned that because I wanted to ask you about your approach to scripts - you've worked with some very good scriptwriters and from some very good texts, for instance Du Maurier for *Don't Look Now* and Conrad on *Hearts of Darkness*. You've also worked with writers like Paul Mayersberg and Dennis Potter. But one of my favourite stories about you is about when you went to scout for *Walkabout* with your son Luc Roeg. And when you returned, your scriptwriter said: "I've finished the script - I think you'll be rather pleased." And he handed you 14 pages of handwritten notes. I think your words then were: "That's perfect."

NR: Mind you, the writer was Edward Bond. It was pretty good.

JW: It seems to me that the script, for you, is just a catalyst, something on which to hang your imagination. Is that accurate?

NR: Yes. Movies are not scripts - movies are films; they're not books, they're not the theatre. It's a completely different discipline, it exists on its own. I would say that the beauty of it is it's not the theatre, it's not done over again. It's done in bits and pieces. Things are happening which you can't get again. I forbid anyone to say "Cut", the soundman, the operator, or whatever.

They think something's gone wrong, but in *Don't Look Now*, for instance, one scene was made by a mistake. It's the scene where Donald Sutherland goes to look for the policeman who's investigating the two women. We had an Italian actor there who couldn't speak any English at all, not even "Hello". Through the interpreter, I told him to say "Hello" when he heard Donald knock on the door. And I saw him walking around the set practising. So when it was time for Donald to knock on the door, the sound operator told the Italian actor, not realising that he didn't speak any English, to stay where he was. So Donald walked down the corridor, knocked on the door and opened the door into an empty room with a big lampshade. Donald hunted around, and the sound operator said "Hello?", and from behind the lampshade came a reply, "Hello!". It was fantastic. Because it was such a tense film, it set the tone - the detective instantly became strange. That has often been remarked on.

On *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, we had a scene where David Bowie first arrives on Earth and walks into town; it's completely empty, things blowing. I couldn't believe this, but there was a children's fairground, with a big bouncy clown thing bouncing around. We had David cross the road and we followed him from behind, and this bouncing clown lost its cables and started bouncing towards him. I looked sideways, and there was a man who'd been lying in one of these torpedoes in a fairground ride. He staggered out of the torpedo towards David and kind of belched in front of him. And that was Mr Newton's first contact with human beings. Fantastic. He was completely baffled. I used that belch at the end too. You can't write that stuff in. So I shoot a lot of stuff. I think that's probably come from not having gone to film school. Things work themselves out. You've lost the showmanship thing, the fairground barker, come-see-what's-inside aspect of film-making when you try to plan everything for the audience.

I had a furious row with a studio executive once: he said, "They won't get it, Nic" and I said, "No, they'll get it; it's you who's not getting it, because you're trying to force something that's different into being the same". People usually arrive to see something with an open mind. I want to make them feel something emotionally, but not by planning how to get them there. That would almost be like the communist days when newspapers told people what to think - when there was no competition with Pravda.

JW: Your work is like a visual and aural assault and has always polarised people. But you've always said that your job as a director is to put ideas out there and for people to respond to them. Is that something that you abide by today? Do you just want people to have a reaction to your films, even if they don't necessarily like them?

NR: Well, I hope that they like them. I made a film called *Bad Timing* that I thought everybody would respond to. It was about obsessive love and physical obsession. I thought this must touch everyone, from university dons down. But it had a curious effect on people - I sort of understood afterwards why it wasn't good for the company. Funnily enough, while it was being made, someone said to me: "You know, they're not going to eat this Nic, because you're scratching surfaces that people probably don't want to have exposed." It was only towards the end, when we were cutting it and we showed it to the musician, who looks at the rough cut. And he said: "Three years ago, I wouldn't have been able to work on this movie because I kept seeing myself on screen there, I was in that trap, in that hole."

JW: We're going to show our first clip here, from *The Man Who Fell To Earth*.

JW: Obviously, the film deals with the subject of alienation. This, to me, seems to be a subject that recurs in a lot of your films. You like to take characters and put them in strange situations and see how they deal with it. Is that an accurate statement?

NR: Yes, that's a raw thought, but in detail, I like the idea of human terms of alienation. But it's also about human secrecy. The lover's oldest question is: "What are you thinking, darling?", then "What are you really thinking?" In that scene, Mary Lou and Mr Newton had been together for a while, and though she thought that he was a bit strange and odd, she had no idea where he came from. Sure he was an alien, but he wasn't a monster. She didn't know that on his planet, it had been planned that he would come to Earth and be among humans, but that they didn't get things quite right with his body. And so when she says that he can tell her anything, which in the human context means "You can tell me

anything and I'll still love you," and he shows her his method of making love - by exchanging bodily fluids on a grand scale - of course she recoils.

Then afterwards, when she approaches him on the bed and he starts oozing again and she recoils again, then he goes back to being human and keeps the secret. And it interested me tremendously, especially with David Bowie. People said, he's an extraordinary artist but, and producers were especially interested only in this one thing, can he act? He is Mr Newton. He's a tremendous performer, he's sung on stage in front of 20,000 people. But it suddenly struck me, when he told me that it was a very important step for him and asked what I wanted for the role, that the best thing I could tell him was that I didn't know who Mr Newton was either. So I told him, "You'll help me by not knowing either. Just do it, say the part". And it was strange - it was better than acting. He was it. He may have been slightly clumsy, and somebody else might have been more together but training would have stopped it. It wouldn't have had the authenticity of the alien, without anything except who he was. It especially worked with the CIA people and the politicians in the film - he didn't know what they were talking about. You can't learn everything by watching TV. So the alien does not appear to be alien, but is in fact more alien than if he'd had a big head. So the throwing away of the alien disguise was rather like exposing yourself emotionally.

JW: Casting-wise, you've always done quite well with popstars. Performance featured Jagger's best performance, and we're going to see a clip later on with Art Garfunkel from *Bad Timing*. You've done really well with them.

NR: Well, they're terrific performers. Another thing was happening: with a lot of the film stars, especially American ones ... Gene Hackman for instance, had been a reporter and in the Marines, and he took acting classes with Dustin Hoffman because he thought he could pick up chicks there. It wasn't to become a big film star. The great difference between screen acting and theatre acting is that screen acting is about reacting - 75% of the time, great screen actors are great reactors. When it comes to film, the director tells the audience what to look at. That doesn't happen on stage. When the dialogue stops, people don't know where to look.

JW: A band called Big Audio Dynamite actually wrote a tribute song to you called $E=mc^2$, and your son Luc directed the video. I think you're probably the first director to have a song written about him and his work. But you've always used music, and sound in general, in a very interesting way. I'm thinking in particular about the beginning of *Track 29*, where you've used John Lennon's *Mother*. In *The Man Who Fell To Earth* you used John Phillips; and then of course in *Performance*, the music is fantastic, and Tom Waits in *Bad Timing*. Is it something you're very aware of? Are you always looking to create an interesting synthesis between image and sound?

NR: Actually, I generally don't like them to match, I like them clashing, doing a different job from just illustrating the picture. We're selective about sound, we tune out things, or maybe you overhear something - and that's an area that's as yet totally unexplored. They sent me a DVD to approve a scene, of *Bad Timing*, as it happens, and in it, there's a scene where a couple meet again and they're talking, but in between their dialogue, in their heads, the soundtrack has their thoughts, but they had cut that down.

JW: We've talked about *Bad Timing*, so this would be a good point to show a clip from it.

JW: I could go on asking questions all night - I've got six sheets of them - but I'm aware that I'm monopolising your time. So we'll throw it open to the audience now.

Question 1: Everything you say about how and why you work makes a lot of sense to me, but what you did at the time was incredibly revolutionary. Didn't you encounter a great deal of resistance from people who just wanted a three-act, linear narrative? And how did you manage to keep saying, "I'm not going to do it that way"?

NR: With a lot of luck, and force of energy too. You're dead right, in fact there's a joke with my films: they're like claret, you need to put them down for five years first. Sandy [Sanford] Lieberman, producer of *Performance*, said after he'd seen *Bad Timing*, "There's no reason why any of your films should have been made, Nic". But he was dead right. It was just extraordinary - I had some terrific producers: Jeremy Thomas was a terrific producer. That's why today has been very odd for me, seeing Eric Fellner and hearing Philip Pullman - who, although he's a writer, talked a lot about film and its influence on him. And what Eric was talking about was why I shouldn't be making movies; well, it felt like it was aimed at me, because I don't make blockbusters.

When *Last Year At Marienbad* was first screened, producers and film executives came out laughing, saying: "They don't even know how to make a movie. You see Sacha Pitoëff go up to his room in a sports jacket, slamming the door shut and then opening it in a dinner jacket." Within three years, that kind of cutting would be *de rigueur*. Any change in form produces a fear of change, and that has accelerated. Marketing is the death of invention, because marketing deals with the familiar. I think it was Max Ernst who said, "I create utterly strange things from the utterly familiar".

But in marketing, the familiar is everything, and that is controlled by the studio. That is reaching its apogee now. Eric is very clever about it, he's now shifting to doing smaller budget things but the rest must be researched, marketed, the script examined very carefully, every hole seemingly blocked up. Now, with people like Soderbergh, making movies has ceased to be a big, expensive deal - even telephones have cameras these days. When I first started, there were four people on sound, five if you count the guy with the cable; microphone wires were wound up by big machines; and outside, there would be another three people on the sound truck. In came tape and bang, five jobs were pointless. It happens before you know it and that is changing the state of film.

Soon, just as people can now go to Ryman's and buy paper to start writing a book, they'll be able to get stuff to start shooting a film. You're right, I was caught in a curious time-warp. I'd done a lot of work, so I was at the forefront of changing or realising the potential of film. I recently saw a film by two young men, and I talked to them two or three times in the past 18 months about their script. They did it on nothing, down in Bournemouth somewhere. It was very good. Marketing is a very good thing, but it shouldn't control everything. It should be the tool, not that which dictates. But it's also about timing - I sometimes wish I had been on time instead of before my time.

Question 2: I want to ask a question about a specific film - there's a scene in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, where a man gets thrown out of a very high window, but it's played in a very light-hearted way.

NR: Well, I don't consider it light-hearted. Fear has many faces. And they had come for him - sometimes, some skinny guy hits out and kills some great thug on his doorstep. So the Buck Henry character, when these thugs in motorcycle helmets come to get him, just can't believe what's happening. Courage is a strange thing, sometimes it comes out of people that you'd never believe possessed it.

Question 3: Two related questions: could you tell us briefly what you feel about David Lean, and apart from Truffaut, who are your favourite directors?

NR: David Lean and I had a terrific beginning, a rather curious and poor middle and a very good end. I shot a lot of stuff on Lawrence - he gave me a unit on my own, and it was a massive unit. We didn't get to know each other well, but he kind of liked one of the last scenes that I shot for him. He wanted me to do *Dr Zhivago* - he was fraught with it because he'd chosen to shoot it in Spain and we just didn't get any snow. Even the mountain area was hopeless. We had marble dust and stuff all faked up. But a curious thing happened, which I understood that I couldn't stop happening. He was a perfectionist, but I was not. Neither can really like each other - it's like a marriage sometimes. David was a perfectionist, and we had a scene where our relationship collapsed - we were running out of time and we came to the scene where Julie Christie and Rod Steiger are in the sleigh going along. He said, "I don't know how we're going to do this" - because in those days we had to set up these huge arc lights. So I suggested leaving the background and just setting up little pup lights to turn around on the sleigh. He said it would never work, but I said that the alternative would be that we would spend hours setting up the arc lights and would probably lose a day and we didn't have the time. We shot the scene over and over again, and it worked.

The next day, the guy from MGM arrived, and after the rushes, this man said, "That's a great shot, the one in the sleigh". So David and I were sitting on the crane later that day to shoot a street scene, and he turned to me and said, "You think I'm old-fashioned, don't you?" and I clapped my hand over his mouth and it was the end. It had been only three days but we fell out; and one of us had to go - it was his movie so I went. It was better anyway because Freddy came back. Then later, David and I were on some panel or something for Bafta, and we had a terrific evening and went for dinner afterwards.

JW: We have to wrap up now but the gentleman also asked about your favourite films.

NR: I'd rather leave that one open.

JW: A massive round of applause for Mr Nicolas Roeg.