

**JERWOOD/FVU
AWARDS**

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AWARDS 2020:
HINDSIGHT**

Guy Oliver
Reman Sadani

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Introduction Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020

One of the quirks of hindsight is that while it renders the errors and habits of the past in sharp and often unforgiving focus, the greater perspective it is supposed to afford doesn't automatically illuminate the best path forward. Hindsight is always 20/20, as the great film director Billy Wilder once said. And foresight is only 50-50, as someone later retorted. Human beings may be wise after the event, but we are not necessarily any the wiser about what will happen next.

In Reman Sadani's film *Walkout 1*, a cloud has descended over an unnamed city. Windblown sand from a far-off desert has settled overhead, causing the sky to turn an ominous shade of orange, and the horizon to be obscured. As if in the bubble of an apocalyptic snow-globe, dust particles hang in the air, and time itself seems suspended. As months go by, with the cloud showing no sign of lifting, a feeling of inertia takes hold. As one day blurs into another and each new dawn fails to materialise, people are stuck in an unchanging present – their prospects dimmed, and with no exit in sight.



Reman Sadani, *Walkout 1*, (still), 2020

A way out of this limbo is suggested by a prophecy, in which an elder, in a sudden flash of light, had a vision of a group of young people walking upwards into the clearing sky. To create the conditions for this miracle to come to pass, four representatives of that younger generation meet in a nondescript apartment, where a female teacher instructs them in the groundwork they need to accomplish. This consists of regular forays into the semi-deserted outside world to gather bagfuls of airborne dust, the contents of which are deposited back at their base and subsequently piled into vertiginous dunes that stack up one after the other like a series of offerings. The youngsters have a metaphorical mountain to climb, and this is their boot camp.

As one day blurs into another, and the expected transformation fails to materialise, the young people become frustrated at the lack of perceptible progress. The sand in the room seems as intractable as the dust in the air outside. Losing faith in their instructor's commands, and, beyond that, the promise of the original vision, they gradually start to turn away from their task. There is a pivotal moment where the sand they are shaping into dunes starts to slide, and their belief starts to crumble with it. From feeling elated (and momentarily elevated) that history has chosen them to be in the vanguard of change, the young people begin to wonder whether the role they are

being groomed for isn't simply a walk-on part in someone else's fantasy.

In Guy Oliver's video *You Know Nothing of My Work*, the shadow hovering over the present has arisen as a result of the dirt kicked up by a growing storm of allegations against famous and powerful men who have been accused of (or charged with) instances of inappropriate behaviour or abuse. The gift of hindsight may have removed the scales from our eyes, but the stain of the events (and the shock of each successive exposé) still lingers. While many of these once-popular figures have been summarily banished, not all of the works that they are known for have correspondingly vanished. Even now, some of the most familiar objects in the cultural firmament continue to radiate light long after the star that produced them has been expunged from the universe, while others have been only partially eclipsed by damning revelations from their creator's biography. Michael Jackson songs still turn up at intervals on the airwaves, as his videos live on, like figments of the undead, on the internet. Eric Gill's signature typefaces are set in stone, even though his name is mud. The cinematic thriller *The Usual Suspects* remains in circulation even after people's suspicions about Kevin Spacey have been confirmed.



Guy Oliver, *You Know Nothing of My Work*, (still), 2020

As Oliver notes in his monologue within the film, which he not only performs but sings, and equally audaciously delivers in rhyming couplets, this celebrity hall of shame, and its grubby, sorry roll-call of 'him too', encompasses both black-and-white, open-and-shut cases and those coloured by murkier shades of grey, in which serial abusers such as Jimmy Savile, *de facto* criminals such as Gary Glitter and contentious, ambivalent figures such as Woody Allen are all in the dock, but for different things. There are crimes and there are misdemeanours (to steal a phrase) with different sanctions (and reputational consequences) for each.

While the courts and the press, and the forum of public and social media opinion, will all pass judgement in their own ways, it often falls to individuals to make a judgement call as to whether the taint of controversy enveloping a particular figure will not only cause them to plummet in their estimation but permanently bring down the curtain on any future interactions with the work they have made. The deciding factor in each of these instances will likely be different for different people, and different again for different examples. One person might argue that since it is impossible to ever decouple the art from the artist, disowning the latter inevitably means ditching the former; whereas someone else might take a diametrically opposing view: that the sweeping injunctions of so-called 'cancel culture', with its blanket ban

on everything associated with a discredited artist, runs the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. As Oliver astutely but increasingly mordantly observes, as his mock-operatic chorus of disapproval draws to a close, the swirl of questions thrown up by this bewildering state of affairs doesn't really offer a clear route forward.

In their different ways, Sadani's and Oliver's films both engage with the fall-out from a loss of illusion, whereby a younger generation in particular has become spectacularly disabused of popular myths or prevailing norms. This widespread disenchantment has prompted people to see through superficial or deceptive impressions and awoken them to reality as it is, only to discover that it is disconcertingly complex and uncertain. *Walkout 1* ends with a dilemma of how to reconcile a desire for unifying collective action with the need to accommodate multiple individual perspectives; *You Know Nothing of My Work* wants nothing more than to shake off the problematic presence of the past, but also concedes that it will be difficult to reach a consensus on how best to do this.

We have had our heads in a digital cloud for more than ten years now: spurred on by the memory of blue-sky thinking, but increasingly troubled by the looming ramifications of the power and influence of Big Data. In the filter bubbles

and echo chambers of the online world, people get their viewpoints reinforced by their previous likes and preferences – an algorithmic hindsight that shapes and determines what may be seen and heard in the future, while conspiring to make that future ever more fragmented and atomised. Few foresaw how swiftly this would happen, and no-one can tell exactly where it will lead. But films like Oliver's and Sadani's, in their vivid encapsulation of the fractured, fractious mood of the present moment, are a compelling bellwether of where we are now.

This text was written on the occasion of the Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020: Hindsight, a collaboration between Jerwood Arts and Film and Video Umbrella.

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Supported using public funding by
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