



Anthony Dod Mantle is the DOP of dogme films such as *Festen*, *Mifune* and *Julien Donkey-Boy*, and recently won a European Film Award for his work on *Dogville* and *28 Days Later*. Perry Ogden caught up with him fresh from the set of Danny Boyle's *Millions* and Thomas Vinterberg's *Dear Wendy*.

You started out as a photographer. How did that come about? Did you go to college?

Yeah, I went to college, I am a real college boy, but I didn't even touch photography or images of any kind until I was about twenty-five. My mother was a very artistic person, so tried to drown me in thinners, canvases and Daumier. And piano teaching, but I just basically kicked a ball around. Played football, tennis and golf until I was old enough to make pizzas and travel abroad.

Where did you go?

France. I travelled with a girlfriend I met in college and we just wanted to learn French and become fluent. It was kind of an indirect exit from England to try and find myself but also a love of French literature and language that I wanted to perfect.

So how did you end up in Denmark?

I went later with another girlfriend, who was Danish, and I travelled on a boat to Denmark not knowing where it was. I spent three months there, learnt a bit of Danish, got to know her family. We were out one day trying to furnish our flat as her parents were coming for dinner the following evening. We went looking for saucepans, plates, any sensible kitchen utensils and we ended up at a jumble sale where I saw a flight case on the top of a shelf. I was very attracted to this case, took it down from the shelf and opened it up to find a Canon FTB camera with three

Tamron lenses, a double extender and a flash, and I thought, "my God, I would love to do that." So my girlfriend took all the money out of her pocket and said, "drop the saucepans, you have found something you want to do." And within three months we were in India and I was using that camera.

Why India?

I went to retrace my grandparents' colonial life – they had been tea planters in Assam – and to get away from England. To really extricate myself from a comfortable envelope of middle class life. And I started photographing in India because I couldn't believe what I was surrounded by – spirituality, colours, life. It was an extraordinary gateway to image making. I took photograph after photograph and came back to Denmark with seven or eight thousand exposures which I went into the darkroom with. Then I applied for a BA course at the London College of Printing even though they had closed the entrance. I'm really not the kind of person who barges their way in but I went to London and managed to get a place.

Is that where your interest in the moving image developed?

Yeah, I was beginning to do the odd picture for Time Out and getting offered other jobs but I had been accepted at the Royal College for an MA course and I felt that I should probably extricate myself from an elitist artist environment which is

what the Royal College was. So I forced myself into the more industrial environment of the Danish National Film School in Copenhagen, because I had this slight connection with Denmark and they have an excellent film school there – especially for cinematographers. I did not expect to get in, as they only took five people every second year, but I did.

Did you speak the language then?

I was stammering, stuttering – and I was a bit nervous. I had a very local dialect that they screamed with laughter at in Copenhagen. But I got there and I used the school a lot.

What did you learn there?

It was not a particularly inspiring artistic environment but I needed the schooling. I needed to establish my own self-confidence via that schooling method. And three years at LCP wasn't enough; I needed more. And even after the National film school I didn't fly straight into Director of Photography work, I kind of assisted on one feature and then I started doing documentaries, working very carefully. And then it happened and I felt confident and now I don't even think about it.

Did you meet Thomas Vinterburg at the National?

No, he was there four or five years after me. I met him on the street one day. I couldn't resist his smile. He had just had a very good review of his short film. So I stopped and just wound the window down in my Volvo, he knew who I was, and I just said congratulations and he had this big smile and I found it quite provocative. And that was my first exchange with him. And then seven months later I called him about the weather in Thailand. He was in a hotel in Paris, I was in Copenhagen.

And you talked to him about the weather?

Yeah, because I knew he had been in Thailand and I was going to go there. And I called him. We had a good chat. And then six months after that I shot his first feature

That was *The Greatest Heroes*?

That's right. I had made my first feature, *The Terrorist*, with a very talented German director, Phillip Gronning. Then my first Danish film with Carsten Rudolph. But *The Greatest Heroes* was my fourth feature. I was getting into the swing of it. The film wasn't a great success but I loved making it. We became very close, Thomas and I, and we felt very strongly that we would do more and the second one we did which was about two films later was *Celebration* (*Festen*) which was a very intense experience for us both – and quite a turning point.

Was it always the plan to shoot *Celebration* on mini DV?

No, originally *Dogme* was meant to be 35mm cameras on the shoulder, hand carried, like the Second World War photographers. Producers have distorted that beyond belief to encourage young directors into doing hand held video rubbish. It's appalling some of the stuff. It's so bad. We did try to make *Celebration* work on film but we couldn't get it to fit the budget. We tried Super 8, which was even more expensive than 35mm, and I stayed away from 16mm because for some reason I felt that was wrong. I tried Hi 8, Super 8 and a mixture of the two. But I ended up with these little DV cameras and felt very strongly about them. The producers did try to encourage me to reconsider and shoot on a heavier, shoulder carried Beta Cam. They slightly panicked, they were concerned it was a bit radical. They were not being stupid about it, just being responsible.

Isn't that what made it though?

I don't know, what do you think? Some say the direction was good. The story was fantastic.

And the casting...

I think that is one of the films where perhaps the acting is allowed to flow with the camera.

If you had shot on 35mm would you have had that flexibility?

Well, that would have been *Babette's Feast* at ninety miles an hour, it would have been *The Dead* or *Fanny and Alexander*. It could have been all of those but it became what it was. I saw it on a big screen again not so long ago and it really touched me. The texture we achieved there, which was so gentle and soft, and struggling. It's decomposing, but I feel it has a metaphor for the story and at the same time there's something devilish and beautiful about it. And it's up there like a painting, maybe a



Left: Lars von Trier with ADM on the set of *Dogville*.

Above: ADM with Chloë Sevigny (top), *It's All About Love* (left) and *Festen* (right).

bad painting. It has another aesthetic. And I think *donkey-boy* (Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-Boy*) projected does too. I think the DVDs of both *Celebration* and very much *Julien Donkey-Boy* let them down. They get hard again and more brutal, they lose their softness.

How did you achieve that texture in *Julien Donkey-Boy*?

We talked a lot about Xerox copies, Harmony and I, even though it was a *Dogme* film, we wanted some how to get this kind of Xerox bursting painterly quality. Which seemed to fit this kind of strange American, I wouldn't say provincial, it's not like *Gummo* – which is a brilliant film – but this sort of Queens/ NY story about this terribly complicated schizophrenic. And being a *Dogme* film you can't do much about it so I shot on everything but I wanted to marry them all. I wanted to put them through some sort of aesthetic post process where it would become an acceptable visual marriage. We couldn't shoot it in Super 8 so we thought we would transfer it somehow or re-film it on Super 8. We had some ideas about projecting it on a velvet curtain, and re-filming that. We didn't know what we were going to do. But we found this lab in Zurich called Swiss Effects and they had a step printer, so we could transfer it to 16mm and then blow it up to 35mm.

16mm gave it a bit more grain.

Yeah, but 16mm these days doesn't even have an organic grain, you have to push it to smithereens to get any grain and 35mm is almost electronic. It's as if the electronic world of HD and the film world are almost trying to meet.

Did you have a main camera on *Julien Donkey-Boy*?

My gut. It was shot from the gut. We looked and looked at each scene and didn't know what we were going to do. We sat there watching and then suddenly it came. It was just like open the cases and it may have been the three chip camera, it may have been the single chip, it may have been the blind people with hidden cameras, it was very...

Spontaneous...

Yeah, but also deliberate. It's a tactic. It's both spontaneous and deliberately trying not to repeat yourself, which is in fact an intellectual process.

Harmony talks about the idea of "mistake-ism"

He does, he talks of that, that was that day. Good on him. "Mistake-ism," the chaos, the order of chaos. (Laughing) The beauty of chaos. He is a man of words, Harmony. He is a terror of words and images.

The film you shot for Danny Boyle, *28 Days Later*, has a much crisper quality but was still shot on mini DV, this time with the Canon XL1

Yes, it's pretty crisp and looks good on DVD.

It must have been hard with so much landscape.

It's all tactics and strategies, you have to know what you want to do in the end before you make the first exposure.

In terms of the lab you are going to use?

Yeah labs and also the process and what you know yourself and what you want to bring to it.

What were the decisions you made?

Well, all electronic formats are difficult.



Dogville



It's All About Love

They are not so inspiring. There is not much available light in *28 Days Later*, it's controlled and heavily lit and the producer rumours about it being just banged off and lit quickly in available light are all absolute garbage. It was a serious production, small cameras, a cheaper form but we worked very hard – particularly the lighting guys and the designer – to try and achieve something given that mediocre format and mediocre resolution. Available light, exterior light, blue skies, greens, they are nightmares on these formats. So I tried first and foremost in shooting to control the light. And to create contrast. And I did sky plates to bring the skies down and get information. The secret is to get as much information as possible into the post and then get yourself secured time in the post with a competent man.

Were you happy with the way *28 Days Later* was cut?

I think in the end, yes, but it was a struggle, I had to go in a lot, I don't leave it, I go back a lot. And I say my piece and I talk about the flow of energy on shooting it, I do talk a lot about that because I think it's important. I think you have to speak your mind.

Tell me about *Dogville*? How did you work with Lars?

I was the creative pragmatist. I was on his left shoulder; I was watching him all the time.

You set him up to film a lot of it himself

Well yeah, I always knew he was going to operate as much as he could himself and that was fine. Lars certainly struck a very intense channel of productivity and clarity. I sat with him on occasions when he was writing *Dogville*, and I was playing, for the first time in my life, his gameboy – it was *Silent Hill*, which incidentally has a street called Elm Street in the middle of the game.

As in the main street of the small town *Dogville*?

Yeah, and the whole visual angle and look of *Dogville* is quite interesting. It's a world between film and theatre and video – and video games.

Wasn't the filmed version of Trevor Nunn's RSC production of *Nicholas Nickleby* a big influence?

Absolutely.

Did you look at that?

No, I try not to look at anything. I try to look at the face in front of me. Generally with the directors, well, with Thomas and I, we tend to talk about references, look at a bit but it gets so digressed and fluffy after the first two scenes that we start talking about something else – puddings, women, whatever. I tend to look at the face, look at the eyes, look at the script of course and hear the words and look at the person in front of me and hear them, that's the strongest potion for me to find my line in. Obviously there are inspirations but if you just imitate or dangerously devote yourself to looking at other schools – designs or visual imagery – it will become second-hand, your work, before you even expose it. You have to be very careful. At the same time it's inevitable, you are obviously affected by other people.

Has *Dogville* been a success for you?

On a personal level, yes, because I didn't waltz into it but I was very glad to finally do a full project with Lars, I've known him for so long. We tried so often and I get buried every time I say no.

You obviously have a very close relationship.

We have a lot fun and I know him very well, he is a good friend. And he is very wise and very trusting, very sensual, eccentric and very artistic. He's a very gifted man – a rare, rare, bird. There are not many of them. I love sharing my life with people like that. It kind of helps you forward. It brings out things in yourself that you maybe weren't altogether aware of. It encourages you to do things that you maybe wouldn't do. It's so important to me. And that is true of all the directors I work with.

You shot *Dogville* on HD. How do you feel about the final look of the film?

Dogville is the example of a film which is exactly how I thought it was going to be, but I did expect Lars to perhaps allow me to push the texture more. It's actually a very fine and gentle rendition of the lighting set ups we had, which we planned very carefully beforehand as it all takes place on one set. And it doesn't look like film, it doesn't look like video, it just looks like what it is, something in between. I would have wanted to give it more texture and pushed the colours but he felt he wanted to be loyal to the story and the original production design, just to be modest with it, and let the actors come forward – which is very much his

philosophy about *Dogville*.

Tell me a little bit about *It's All About Love*.

It's a love story shot on Super 35mm, it's not a film that holds you by the hand, but it's very close to our hearts, Thomas and I.

And you worked on film for that?

Yeah, absolutely and my kind of inspirations were the Technicolor period, the classic, the epic – I wanted to boost certain colours. I knew very much what I wanted to do there with the designer, who left early before we started shooting but I had control of the colours and the format is very much an attempt at a modern interpretation of an epic method. It's a suggestive story more than an explicit story and if you fall off the bandwagon early on it's very hard to get back on. If you go expecting just a kind of a poem, then I think it's a serious piece of cinema.

And you've just finished another feature with Thomas – *Dear Wendy*.

Lars wrote it and Thomas directed. It was shot half in Denmark and half in Germany. And it takes place again in America. As such it's a film about weapons and I used Edward Curtis' still photographs of the American Indians, from a hundred years ago, as my inspiration.

And what about Hollywood, are you avoiding them or are they avoiding you?

I would understand them wanting to avoid me, I would probably get fired after two weeks. But I do get offers, I got offered a very interesting one with the guy from *Schindlers List*, the Irish guy...

Liam Neeson...

Yes, about Kinsey, the guy who had the theories about sexuality, a fifties story. It was after they saw *It's All About Love*, I think, and they just called me and said, "five months in NY, pretty high budget." It would have been an interesting American film to do after "donkey-boy" but I was doing *Millions*. I could sense it was a good script, it was a good character, I like that guy Neeson, like him a lot. Maybe with the huge success of *28 Days Later* in America I am going to get bombarded with offers now.

Perry would like to thank Tony Keily for commissioning this interview. A longer version will shortly be published on www.filmireland.net.