



THE FILMS OF SAINT ETIENNE

Finisterre

+ Q&A with Bob Stanley and Pete Wiggs

Back, further back... to 2003. *Finisterre* seemed to come out of nowhere. Its makers all had form – as video directors (Kieran Evans), as members of cherished if semi-forgotten independent bands (Paul Kelly had once been in East Village), and of course Saint Etienne had been lively-ing up the pop charts with their stylish take on art-pop for over a decade – but it still seemed a curious alliance. Not a few bands had tried their hands at filmmaking – The Pet Shop Boys' *It Couldn't Happen Here* (1988), The Style Council's *Jerusalem* (1987), The KLF's *The White Room* (1989) – but the results tended to be curios or catastrophes.

Finisterre was a revelation. It wasn't fiction, and yet – because it had no presenter, wasn't an exposé and didn't advance any obvious argument – felt very unlike a traditional documentary. Perhaps it was a film essay, a vagrant and discursive kind of non-fiction film associated with directors such as Harun Farocki and Jean-Luc Godard? If so, it was rather less austere and self-consciously analytic than any of those made by the many moving-image artists who have been drawn to that form in recent years. If it was a city symphony in the tradition of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) it was a peculiarly droll and English take on the genre. More ambiguity: why name a film about London after a word meaning 'world's end', one that is also a semi-mythical place, most familiar to devotees of the Shipping Forecast on BBC Radio 4?

The most obvious influence on *Finisterre* is that of *London* by Patrick Keiller. Made in 1994, this strange alloy of travelogue, political treatise, and cultural theory has often been described as an example of cinematic psychogeography. Its signature elements include its concentration on overlooked and sometimes bland sites within the capital; its use of still photography and of wide-angled panoramas offset by tightly focused close-ups; a plummy, learned voiceover (delivered by Paul Scofield).

Keiller's style of filmmaking – which he would further refine in *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) – is immediately recognisable and easy to mimic. *Finisterre* doesn't mimic it though. For a start, it approaches London from a different starting place: Keiller's film, though it may seem becalmed, is furious – at the re-election in 1992 of a Conservative government that a few years earlier had abolished the Greater London Council out of political spite at its radical policies, at the sense of malaise and anti-modernity it finds in the capital; the thinkers and writers it cites (many of them French) tend to be drawn from the realm of high culture.

Finisterre comes at London through the lens of pop music. Most of its confidantes and beery theorists – among them Mark Perry, Vic Godard and Nick Sanderson from the band Earl Brutus – are very English. But the crucial difference between *London* and *Finisterre* is that the former seeks to investigate the 'problem of London', whereas the latter is happiest championing the possibilities of London. Keiller completed his film after Black Monday and the recession of 1992; Evans and Kelly were shooting at a time when the capital's economy seemed to be healthy, its appeal to outsiders and immigrants was still rising, and when the excitement created by the mass demonstrations against war in Iraq hadn't curdled into the cynicism about New Labour that would prevail throughout the rest of the decade.

In fact, *Finisterre*'s abiding belief that, far from being exhausted, London is still a place for dreamers and schemers, for hatching brighter tomorrows, allows it to translate into film the sentiments so memorably evoked by Jon Savage in his sleeve notes for Saint Etienne's debut album *Foxbase Alpha* (1991):

'Down in Camden, London in your throat. The lowest point in the city, a sink for pollution, noise, destitution. But it's here that you can find the raw material to make the world the way you hear it. Walking though the congested streets and alleys, you're assaulted by a myriad of sounds, looks and smells from all over the world, each with its own memory and possibility.'

'Dreams never end.' 'Always aspire to a better life.' 'Nothing's too good for the common people.' The script is speckled with upbeat imprecations.

Modernism isn't lamented so much as celebrated: the narrator invokes the 'perverse possibilities of the Barbican'; Anneliese Midgley-Shukman confides that when she approaches High Point, 'I think of angels singing'. One of the loveliest scenes is set atop Primrose Hill where, accompanied by a blissy, almost-Balearic, reworking of the Saint Etienne song 'Soft like Me', the directors show people milling around and looking down at London. Their backs are turned to us, so we, like them, bathe in the panorama and gaze – perhaps wistfully, perhaps euphorically – at the beauty below. Temporarily we become a community of yearners.

How hard it is not to feel dewy-eyed about this rhapsody to London as a dream space, a city for those who crave escape, reverie, drifting. At one point the record producer Liam Watson recalls the dole culture of a bygone era in which musicians, knowing that they – like other 20-somethings – were eligible for modest but liveable social security grants from the government, didn't feel obliged to get jobs as soon as they left college: they could form bands, take their time to work out what kind of sounds they wanted to produce, experiment and maybe make mistakes. That London – a kind of populist demi-monde brilliantly evoked by Geoff Dyer in his novel *The Colour of Memory* – still exists, but maybe only in Berlin. Those stipends certainly no longer exist, and precarious young Londoners, many of them saddled with ever-growing student debts, are bullied into putting aside their idealism in favour of what Mark Fisher calls 'capitalist realism'.

This isn't to say that *Finisterre*'s London is a fantasia. Kelly and Evans give voice to a canal boat owner who talks about louts hurling stones and even shooting at him. A musician says that lots of gig goers in the city are miserable churls. Someone else kvetches about London becoming too much of a commodity. And, in a vital sequence, a series of young council estate kids are shown looking directly at the camera: they're the kind of Londoners society increasingly labels as 'feral', 'chavs', 'ASBO-earning underclasses'. As we study their faces – earnest, defiant, opaque – it's tempting to wonder what, now they're in their 20s, has become of them: have they prospered over the last decade? Did they get caught up in the 2011 riots? Do they even live in London?

At the same time, it's true to say that what makes *Finisterre* stand out from a lot of the books and films produced about London in recent years is its refusal of the aesthetics of the apocalypse. Like Norman Cohen's *The London Nobody Knows*, the filmmakers and Saint Etienne are alive to and chastened by the rate of change in the capital: real-estate speculation and grand projects like the Olympics and Crossrail have taken their toll on lots of old cafes, natty neighbourhoods, maybe even the sense of 'public space'. But while many of the most important treatments of the city – Iain Sinclair's *City of Disappearances* anthology, Laura Oldfield Ford's *Savage Messiah* zine (2006-2009), China Mieville's essay *London's Overthrow* (2012), documentaries such as Winston Whitter's *Legacy in the Dust* (2008) and Emma Louise William's *Under the Cranes* (2011) – are notable for their mourning, anger and

outrage, *Finisterre* is more wistful than melancholic, and ultimately more optimistic than pessimistic about the capital’s ability to outwit the cynicism of profiteers.

Nowhere does that optimism come through more radiantly than in the screenplay written by Evans, Bob Stanley and former *Hungry Beat* fanzine editor Kevin Pearce. Like London itself, it’s a collage – of rhymes and references, of manifestoes and pop lyrics and literary quotations. Like great pop songs, it compresses complex ideas, universes of feeling into poetic fragments: ‘Use the fury of the hour/ Anger can be power’, says Jayston over shots of anti-war protestors; ‘Use a bank? I’d rather die!’ he says later in a declaration that seems almost prophetic in the light of the banking scandals in the years since the film was completed.

At times it’s unclear if the lines are their own or citations – or whether such a distinction matters. (Do we write cities or do cities write us?) Taken as a whole, *Finisterre* is not only a shining example of that emerging genre – the audio essay – but, alongside Peter Cusack’s *Your Favourite London Sounds* (2001), DJ Wrongspeed’s *Original Pirate Flava* (2004), Mark Fisher and Justin Barton’s *London under London* (2005), as well as Kelly and Saint Etienne’s next film, *What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day?* (2007), one of the most important sonic treatments of London produced this century.

Finisterre hasn’t aged a bit. Many of the shop fronts, streetscapes and pathways it documented have been erased, and the city itself has become more costly – and, in its stratifications, a little harder to love. But as a cinematic achievement – its compositional beauty, its emotional potency, its pitch-perfect ability both to cherish what’s old and enduring about the capital while also honouring its power to refashion and shapeshift – it feels as exhilarating as the first day of spring.

Sukhdev Sandhu, ‘Dreamers and Schemers: *Finisterre*’, from *A London Trilogy: The Films of Saint Etienne 2003-2007* DVD booklet (BFI, 2013)

FINISTERRE

Filmed and directed by: Paul Kelly, Kieran Evans
Executive Producers: Bob Stanley, Martin Kelly
Produced by: Jason Hocking, Andrew Hinton
Written by: Kevin Pearce, Kieran Evans, Bob Stanley
Edited by: Kieran Evans
Assistant Editor: Nick Parish
All Music by: Saint Etienne
With special thanks to: Ian Catt
Sound Mix by: Ian Chattam, Dan Chapman
Assisted by: Kimmy Sekel
Narrated by: Michael Jayston
Featuring the voices of: Mark Perry, Julian Opie, Liam Watson, Andy Hackett, Anneliese Midgley-Shukman, Shena Mackay, Vashti Bunyan, Isabel Waidner, Nick Sanderson, Lawrence, Vic Godard

UK 2003
59 mins

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Finisterre + Q&A with Bob Stanley and Pete Wiggs
Sat 4 Sep 15:00
How We Used to Live + Q&A with Pete Wiggs and Travis Elborough
Sat 4 Sep 17:20
Saint Etienne: Shorts Programme + intro by Paul Kelly and Pete Wiggs
Sun 5 Sep 13:00
Lawrence of Belgravia + Q&A with Paul Kelly and Lawrence
Sun 5 Sep 15:30
What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day? + Q&A with Pete Wiggs and Paul Kelly
Sun 5 Sep 18:30

A London Trilogy: The Films of Saint Etienne 2003-2007 is available to buy in the BFI Shop:
<https://shop.bfi.org.uk/a-london-trilogy-the-films-of-saint-etienne.html>

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