

# MATT WOLF AND LUKE FOWLER

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**MATT:** When did you seriously get into film? I know music has been an important thing for you for a long time. Did your interest in film develop early on as well?

**LUKE:** I've always watched television, and I've watched films on television since I can remember because my father was a massive film buff. He pretty much got me into watching a lot of television and a lot of films that were perhaps slightly in the margins, such as European and world cinema.

**MATT:** Did you watch films on the BBC?

**LUKE:** Yeah. We were fortunate because when I was growing up, television was very good. It was very high quality for the most part. In my lifetime it has seriously deteriorated, however. It's been quite sad, actually. I was having a conversation with the writer Peter York, who is doing consulting for BBC television on the future of the channel, and we were talking about this. He was inquiring about what was wrong with television, how and when it went wrong, and what we could do to make it better.

**MATT:** From afar, my impression was always that British television was really progressive and that they helmed really innovative, independent filmmaking for a time. Is that just a fantasy, or is that actually true?

**LUKE:** No. I mean, I can't compare it to any other system abroad, but I certainly found it to be a stimulating source. I probably watched more films than read books. Perhaps it's a delusion, but I think I can remember when Channel 4 was just starting. I may be wrong. I think it was in the early '80s. You can check that precisely. But I have it in my mind that I remember the early days of Channel 4, and it was incredibly exciting. There were all these shows, like *The Comic Strip Presents . . .*; films that were made expressly for the channel; and a lot of experimental film and abstract animation. It felt like a lot of these things, like world cinema, would never get shown on other channels. It was in the channel's constitution to represent people or groups that were marginalized and

weren't being represented on other channels. My dad taped films throughout his life, and he left this incredible collection of films and TV programs.

**MATT:** He just taped everything off the TV?

**LUKE:** Yeah, but often missing the start of a program, and the tape would often finish before the show ended. He was quite frugal, and with not that many tapes on hand, he'd often recycle existing ones.

**MATT:** That's so funny because my dad did the same thing and had this huge VHS archive of movies that played on TV. He still sends an e-mail every week to his friends listing the classic movies that are playing on cable every week. A similar situation, except I think he threw out all those VHS tapes because they probably didn't work anymore.

**LUKE:** Yeah, I've still got my dad's. It's always exciting whenever I go to the cinema to see a film that I saw as a lad and think, fuck—he missed a crucial fifteen minutes! Ones that were often really important to the plot. Sometimes he'd cut out the adverts in the middle, too, and then forget to press record again, creating his own director's cut!

**MATT:** That's so funny. Was there an art-house movie theater where you grew up?

**LUKE:** Yeah. I've got a pretty privileged background in terms of culture. My dad taped all of this stuff from television and turned me on to a lot of filmmakers that I was probably reticent about at the time. Although I liked Stanley Kubrick and directors like that, there were some works that were too advanced for a thirteen-year-old, like Kieslowski's. My favorite films that he showed me when I was younger were Lindsay Anderson's and the social-realist films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh; all pretty standard fare for Brits. He went to the theater a lot and sometimes to the GFT, which was our local art-house cinema. Glasgow actually has—my friend did research into it and discovered this—more cinemas per person, per capita, than any other city in Britain. We were cinema mad, you know? In the '50s, particularly, we were really obsessed with American film noir and American gangster films. And as a result, the colloquialisms have seeped into the language. Like, to this day in Glasgow, people sometimes get called "guy" and "doll."

**MATT:** Amazing.

**LUKE:** So there's this kind of American fascination going on, and obviously there are Italians as well in Glasgow. So there's definitely a strong cinema culture... Although I'm not quite sure what people watch now.

**MATT:** I grew up in San Jose, California. I don't know if you've heard of it. It's where the personal computer was born.

**LUKE:** What year was that? 1980? 1982?

**MATT:** I'm not exactly sure, but there's a miniature museum devoted to the subject near my parents' house.

**LUKE:** When were you born?

**MATT:** I was born in '82. When I grew up in San Jose, the city really transformed into an economic center because of the dot-com boom. It became a chaotic and bizarre place that was pretty devoid of culture. But there was a really cutting-edge art-house cinema chain in San Jose. I remember when I came out as gay—really young, when I was fourteen—I was seeking some sort of countercultural haven. San Jose definitely didn't have that, and I was too young to seek it out elsewhere. But this chain of movie theaters had all of the best independent and art-house films from around the world, and I would go there at least once or twice a week by myself. So the movie theater became an alternative outlet for me once I came out.

I was wondering if you became a fan of avant-garde film at some point before you were making films, or if your involvement with what's considered experimental filmmaking was more organic?

**LUKE:** I suppose there is a distinction between art-house films that were made in an industrial process than this other kind of personal cinema, the kind of experimental films of [Robert] Beavers, [Hollis] Frampton, [Paul] Sharits, etc. I think I was exposed to that kind of cinema very, very late—probably after art school, actually. I was much more aware of video art. At that time in Glasgow, Douglas Gordon was just starting to show. I went to see *24 Hour Psycho* at the Tramway, and there was a lot of video art getting shown at the time, in general. That was a kind of nascent scene; an explosion, really.

**MATT:** The early stages of art-world friendly, high-production-value video art, right?

**LUKE:** Yeah, yeah. Some of it was pretty high production. I was inspired and wanted to do that at art school. I

wanted to get into the time-based art department, but I never got accepted. I remember I made this very basic video that involved making a piece of electronic music and then sticking in some footage of driving at night. A bit like a Kraftwerk video or something. Like I say—very, very basic.

**MATT:** When I was getting totally obsessed with film, editing software was accessible and my high school had bought a video camera. So it was feasible for me to start making videos when I was sixteen. I had never seen proper video art. The only avant-garde cinema I had seen was Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger's compilations, which were stocked in the local library. So that kind of "visual poetry" model of filmmaking was what I was trying to emulate and learn from in high school.

I knew I wanted to be an experimental filmmaker, but I didn't know what that meant. But when I got to New York, there were all these micro-cinemas and underground film festivals, and the library at NYU had basically the full back catalog of Video Data Bank and Electronic Arts Intermix, the main distributors of video art in the US. So I really got immersed in 1980s and '90s video art history. I started doing hybrid films in school that mixed fake documentary elements and staged narratives. The work was heavily indebted to, or derivative of, this kind of video art that I was obsessively absorbing at the time, along with '90s New Queer Cinema.

**LUKE:** What kind of names?

**MATT:** The film that was the biggest turning point for me in terms of wanting to make my own films was Todd Haynes's *Poison*. I don't know if you've seen that. I was also really interested in reenactment video art, like Ant Farm's JFK assassination video, *The Eternal Frame*, or Elisabeth Subrin's film *Shulie*, which is a shot-by-shot reenactment of a 1970s student film about an art student who would later become a radical feminist icon.

**LUKE:** So how many years of a gap was there before you made the Arthur Russell film? At what point did you decide you wanted to make something that was a documentary, essentially? Not to say that the film doesn't have a rich experimental history in the way it is edited and shot. While I was watching it, I was thinking how there were a lot of different textures in the material—a sophisticated sense of materiality that you don't find in more traditional documentaries. But it's still a documentary, isn't it?

**MATT:** I don't think I ever expected to work within the framework of documentaries. I always had somewhat of

a cynical attitude about most documentaries. When I finished film school, I definitely rejected what I perceived to be the conventional film industry. I was an assistant to an abstract painter and to a video artist. I was writing about art and I was pursuing filmmaking from a more conceptual, studio-based practice. But in that practice I generated a few larger ideas, and one of them was about this avant-garde composer and disco pioneer Arthur Russell. Initially the idea was to do an experimental film about him. And I had conceptualized it as being like a record, where there would be a series of “tracks” as alternatives to scenes. I conceived that these various components could be experienced nonlinearly, like a record skipping around to different tracks, or that the film could form a full, linear experience, like an album. Of course, the film would later take on a more conventional structure and form.

**LUKE:** What was it about Arthur Russell that you felt would translate into the kind of filmmaking you were interested in?

**MATT:** I think at the time I was hunting for cultural material that most resonated with me. And I was getting obsessed with Arthur Russell. I related to him as a gay outsider, someone who was involved in the avant-garde culture of downtown New York in the 1980s. Because his music took such an experimental approach, I wanted to conceive of an appropriate form to represent it. But once I started doing interviews, I realized that I had a real knack for it. Interviewing people was a whole different kind of process, one which I never assumed art was about. I didn’t know that an artistic process could be relating to people and going through a journey with them in the course of a recorded conversation. So much about the dynamic of an interview intrigued me, and as I was conducting them, I realized that I was creating the bedrock of a more conventional documentary film. I had an opportunity, and in some ways a responsibility, to begin engaging in the more traditional kind of storytelling that I had been so resistant to while I was a student.

**LUKE:** Let’s talk about interviewing, then. I think you left a lot of space for people to talk—to find their own words, in their own time—which was really compelling. And you weren’t pushing anything like an agenda down their throats. It wasn’t a lot of closed questions, or a pushy, confrontational style. I think what makes a successful interviewer is someone who actually builds a rapport with the person and allows him or her to open up; someone who doesn’t go along with a set of assumptions or hypothesis that you want to prove. That’s why I like

the interviews in *Wild Combination*. There are also two strategies to interviews, isn’t there? Actually, I suppose there are a lot of strategies, but I think one strategy is to play dumb.

**MATT:** Totally, yeah.

**LUKE:** And go, oh, what is experimental music? It allows things to evolve and to get down to fundamentals. I think that reveals a lot about an individual’s basic worldview—how he or she assembles language; the deep-seated beliefs and assumptions that make up one’s individual thought-processes. I don’t know if you use that technique?

**MATT:** What I learned through the process of doing interviews is that anybody can frame their experience or their knowledge in the form of a story. There’s a great therapeutic power to people stepping back, slowing down, and evaluating what they have to say. I think that’s very cathartic and empowering for people in a way, because it connects the dots of somebody’s own life experience. It makes them think—just like we’re doing right now: Where does our interest in film come from? There’s a real story there, and ours are actually similar in some ways, in terms of coming to film.

I think something that was unique about the Arthur Russell film is that these stories would ultimately revolve around death, because the interviews were about a subject who had died prematurely. So I felt that there was a sensitive and appropriate way to approach the heightened experience of recounting Arthur’s death. I had to go through that experience with people, and that was really intimate. It ended up teaching me how to make the film, because every interview in a way was a micro-cosmic film. It was the encapsulation of each individual’s narrative—the facet of a larger narrative, but also a full story in its own. And in these interviews, there was a peak of heightened emotional reflection about Arthur’s death, but there was also a kind of immediate reflection afterward that brought the person back. We had to end the conversation in a cathartic place. This was the ultimate guide on how to most sensitively and effectively construct the film.

**LUKE:** Yeah, there’s a very strong sense of biography and biographical structure to the film. I was thinking about that because it also seems to me that the film is very beautiful. Even the talking-head scenes—which I’m normally very opposed to—were quite well shot, which surprised me. I think that’s a very difficult thing to do.

**MATT:** Yeah.

**LUKE:** There was something quite appealing about the way that you shot it. I wondered whether you worked with a crew, because the film was too well produced for it to have been just yourself going in there guerrilla-style, which is what I do.

**MATT:** It's funny you bring that up because I was going to talk to you about that in terms of, like ...

**LUKE:** About how badly shot my films are? [Laughs]

**MATT:** No, no, not at all. But in terms of how I work with a crew, and I have a close collaboration with a cinematographer and an editor. There's lighting. It's more of a traditional film shoot.

**LUKE:** But does that get in the way of the catharsis? Of getting a sort of emotional resonance from the person, or an intimacy? I mean, when you've got a really hot light in your face and you've got three people in a room all staring at you?

**MATT:** To me, if I didn't have a camera operator, I wouldn't be able to make sustained eye contact with the subject. I think looking at notes or looking away is a major disruption from the interview. There probably will be a time when I come across a subject who won't be able to handle that kind of apparatus around him or her, and the filmmaking would become an obstacle.

Shifting gears a little. I love all of the structuralist, Super-8 components in your films and the impressionist visuals, which mellifluously combine with the archival materials. To me, this is the most distinct way that your films relate to that tradition of the avant-garde. Your filmmaking has a highly subjective point of view that definitely feels rooted from your hands and your eye. I really appreciate that. I would assume that this approach is not just a function of economics, but that it's really a choice. I see traces of structural filmmaking, but also a more general approach that seems personal.

**LUKE:** Yeah. I admit there's a few oblique [Michael] Snow, Beavers and [Gregory] Markopoulos references. I'm also quite a fan of Hollis Frampton. I think one of the things that I got a bit more serious about around that time was the notion of appropriating the affects of the avant-garde as a kind of technique. I think that's something I've since become wary of because it's too easy to reduce these approaches to just formal tricks. Perhaps it's too frivolous

to use that sort of appropriation, and maybe it's not a very rigorous or thoughtful approach. But I am, in a way, like, so what? But then I also wonder if a work always has to be conceptually robust. Can't it be a kind of playful thing? I think all of these techniques have signs and signifiers attached to them. One reads them in certain ways, and I suppose the ways that people were reading some of the formal aspects in my work made me a bit reticent about repeating those strategies. For *Bogman Palmjaguar*, a lot of people thought that the abstract moments in the film—when the camera moves through the undergrowth, etc.—had this suggestion of a first-person point of view, that I was recreating Bogman's point of view, which was never my intention. So I think if one is more careful about why one uses the camera in a certain way, then the work is less likely to be misread.

I never went to film school, but apart from that, we had a similar path in terms of being influenced by video art and film, but still making films using the documentary approach. For a long time, actually, I had a problem calling my films documentaries. I really had a chip on my shoulder about it. People would say to me, what do you make? And I would say, experimental films that have a nonfiction subject. Then I realized that I was just being a bit of a pedant.

**MATT:** For better or worse, it's easy to describe them as experimental documentaries.

**LUKE:** Yeah, but that's a whole genre, and I suppose it depends on whether you want to sit in that genre.

**MATT:** It's not always a happy genre ...

**LUKE:** Yeah, I don't know if I want to be bedfellows with that genre. I think—

**MATT:** Like travelogues and diary films. Your films aren't like that.

**LUKE:** I'd prefer to say now that I'm an artist who makes films.

**MATT:** Creative nonfiction, I think, is a broader and happier term to apply to your work.

**LUKE:** Yeah. I view them as being personal films. And yes, there are documentary elements in them, and, to cut to the chase, you can simply call them documentaries. But I also wouldn't say that was true for all of my films and installations. There are definitely films I've made

that don't have their roots in documentary. But some of the films do, and the processes I have used are probably very similar to traditional documentary. But I think that was something I became conscious of as I matured as an artist—although I hate to think of this sentence being written down [*Laughs*]*—that kind of inevitable self-critique that we both are being exposed to. Not even self-critique, but just critique per se by other people and by film critics.*

There were questions that came up: What is this? Why is this not a documentary? Because I was always adamant that it wasn't a documentary. And people would say to me: Well, why is it not a documentary? I had to kind of scramble with language in critiquing your work, which wasn't the best place to be in, really, that kind of navel-gazing. Sometimes it's easier just to say that it's a documentary than to say it isn't a documentary and then have to defend it. I definitely think that it's far from straight. What I've always attempted to do was to make films that didn't fall back on a kind of formula or schema and which questioned these modes of production and assumptions about how films can be constructed.

Naturally one begins to question how stories are told, and how representations are created and reproduced. I think that's one of the main problems I have with the documentary tradition: I can see how the apparatus of manipulation is taking place before my eyes. I feel quite an ambivalence toward the kind of documentary films on musicians in which I am interested, in particular.

I would say that there are points in your film that I have problems with. It's this way of . . . I suppose, a kind of emotional manipulation for dramatic purpose. The conditioning of the responses and roles that both the interviewer and the interviewee play in the process of constructing a narrative from reality.

The reality is then transformed into a cultural reproduction whether you like it or not, and it happens as soon as you set up an interview in front of a film crew. They're all of a sudden performing, enacting their own assumptions about how they should be presented in their "role" in front of the camera. I think that is something which, as a filmmaker, I'm trying to consider and deal with, to prevent that. Because in my mind, it's a problem.

**MATT:** I was thinking about something a film programmer told me that relates to this critique of documentaries and the ways in which they can proscriptively oversimplify things. He said that a particular European film festival didn't care for most American documentaries. The organizers observed that many of these American documentaries purport to tell you something that the filmmaker assumes

you don't know anything about. Then these films proceed to tell you what to think about that subject. I thought that was a really accurate critique of documentaries. Many films don't allow you to think for yourself; they pretend you're coming to the material in a vacuum, or the filmmakers feel that they must construct a resolution or a thesis. I think what you're saying in a way is true. My film does impart a narrative structure and the subjects become orchestrated within it. And there are some representational problems with that.

I appreciate that your films aren't thesis-driven. Your films create a context to engage in a process of thinking, and there are larger, unfixed ideas at play. I don't feel like I'm being told what to think or feel. Do you think your films are about the subjects they represent, or are they departures from the subject matter?

**LUKE:** I feel like that's always been one of the key catalysts for making my films. For my first three films at any rate, I always maintained that I didn't make portraits of individuals. They were portraits of communities and of certain times and certain sets of ideas that were part of a zeitgeist, being explored or experimented with. And so the first film: People call it the R. D. Laing film, but actually it's a film about a household and the people in the household, and a community, and how the community functions, and how this experiment functioned. The second film could be seen as a portrait of an individual, but I see it more as a portrait of a type—an archetype of punk, really; the kind of punk attitude that was a real rebellion, an aggressive kind of confrontation of capitalism and capitalist values inherent in pop music and music-industry marketing. The Cardew film is really an investigation of an amateur and amateur music-making and the politics that are inherent in music-making and political reality. In terms of the political realities of that time—which I suppose were about some social or political responsibility that one felt as an artist at that time—one can't deny that artists had to take these things seriously. I suppose those things were the questions I was asking myself as an artist and as a musician at the time. All of these films were also informed by my own personal experiences, like my experience with conventional psychiatry, and my father's relation to it. In that way, *What You See is Where You're At* was a very cathartic film to make. It's also, though, a reaction against the very idea that the personal was political. At the time I thought, well, no actually—this film cannot just be a personal meditation; the personal can quite often degenerate into self-indulgence or obsession.

I wanted to convey information and in a style that was

a correlative . . . I think all of the films embody a style or embody a form that is empathetic with the subject matter.

**MATT:** I think that definitely comes across—that the form is definitely responsive to the content. There isn't really a continuous logic to the formal strategies in each film. They all seem to take different approaches.

**LUKE:** I'm making it up as I go. And that's what's exciting for me about each new film. I'm reinventing what I do as I go along. I think one has to continually do that as an artist, to continually reassess how you can push something and learn from it.

**MATT:** I always felt like it would be a real burden to develop a signature style. I would feel so much anxiety about breaking away from that style. As a filmmaker, it seems inevitable that the style or form that you use will always be changing because the subject matter will always have such unique demands.

Something I was thinking about, too: Just as documentary is a problematic term, so is experimental. But your films are often about different kinds of social experiments or experimental ideology. So, in a sense, they demand an experimental treatment.

**LUKE:** Yeah, when I'm editing a film I certainly try to ask what would be the most obvious thing to put with what's being said right now. So whatever the most obvious thing is, let's do the opposite. There's also a kind of disorientation that's going on. There's a desire to disorient the viewer and to manipulate the viewer into a—not into an emotional empathy, necessarily, but into a sense of not knowing.

**MATT:** I think these kinds of strategies allow viewers to abandon their expectations. By disorienting a viewer and creating a kind of pandemonium in which it's unclear where the beginning and the end is, where there aren't familiar emotional cues, the viewer opens up in a new kind of way. They're open to whatever it is you're choosing to show.

**LUKE:** That chimes with what I'm saying. If film can reflect experiences of your life and your life isn't always a smooth, linear curve, like consciousness—it's all over the place. It's backwards and forwards and still and boring and exciting and fragmented. I try to reflect that in the way that I edit films.

You've also got to let the film develop as you develop. For me, the film is a journey. The process of searching is the journey that you go through. It's a journey of

self-discovery, of revelation, and of questioning. One of the problems that a more conventional industrial cinema has is that it represents the journey as being something fixed and smooth and effortless; a kind of manufactured experience.

**MATT:** Absolutely, yeah.

**LUKE:** It's a mechanical process. For a lot of TV documentary crews, you get in, ask the scripted questions, and get out, unquestioningly following a formula. Chuck in a bit of archival footage and minimalist music, and voilà. So if one's really serious about doing something that is both challenging to themselves and to the viewer, you have to be open to the myriad ways that each situation can unfold.

**MATT:** I don't really want to see art that's made by experts. I find that to be an undesirable position to be in—to be the expert.

**LUKE:** Yeah, the efficient hack disease. One of the reasons, for me, to make those films was this opportunity to meet all of these people who were, like . . . It's amazing to actually meet people that you don't often have that kind of opportunity to—

**MATT:** Totally.

**LUKE:** As a filmmaker you are given permission to spend an hour, or several days, in the company of, say, one of the greatest living interpreters of Cage's music or whoever. So making a film enables you—or provides the excuse—to spend intimate time with a person whom you may incredibly admire. ■