



Stuart Croft  
Drive In

## WHAT

Humans are creatures of narrative. We are formed by our stories – in a quite literal sense. It's through stories that we're introduced to the realm of language, as children; that we're taught, in particular, to express abstract concepts to do with the past and the future – concepts which other species of animals, though they may possess some degree of communicative or linguistic ability, singularly lack; concepts which, in that sense, make us uniquely human. More specifically, it's through our early exposure to narrative structures, neuroscientists now believe, that we're able to piece together that most fundamental of abstractions, the idea of the self – and this fiction of selfhood becomes the dominant narrative for the rest of our lives, as we funnel our everyday experiences into a kind of ongoing autobiography.

No wonder, then, that popular forms of narrative exert such a powerful influence upon us. Myths, novels, movies, television dramas – all of these provide an arena where the basic structural elements of our psyches – such primal distinctions as lost/found, safety/danger, love/hate – are constantly reaffirmed; where the various twists and turns of plot act as a sort of echo, both familiar yet thrillingly distant, of our own narrative selves. Indeed, the more basic and plot-driven the narrative, the more compelling, even addictive, it becomes. After all, surely everyone has had the experience of being unable to put down some trashy novel or turn off some awful daytime movie; of wanting to escape the narrative, yet being held captive by the dysfunctional, almost physical desire to discover what happens next.

Stuart Croft's film, *Drive In*, takes such ideas of being trapped within narrative and makes them literal. The work is like a sort of dream or reverie, in which latent anxieties become manifest, and outward appearances start to slip away. On the surface, *Drive In* seems to echo mainstream narrative formats, with its stylised colour-grading evoking some primetime television drama, and its title punning on more trashy forms of entertainment; yet overall the nagging sense is of something much weirder and more sinister forcing its way up from beneath: some darker, hidden aspect of narrative, willing itself into existence, forcing itself to be told.

**WHAT**

**HAPPENS**

**NEXT**

## HAPPENS

In terms of plot, the actual story in *Drive In* is pretty straightforward – the story, that is, which is narrated out loud by the female passenger in the car. It's certainly a gripping tale: an elaborate, meandering, shaggy-dog fantasy about a guy who washes up on a desert island, and his subsequent romantic involvement with the sole other inhabitant, a female artist. Expertly told by the narrator, and full of intrigue and mystery, betrayals and sudden reversals of fortune, not to mention various personal flourishes – such as the particular focus on the mechanics of tool-craft – it's precisely the sort of plot-driven, up-and-down narrative that's designed to trigger that most basic, slavish, what-happens-next response on the part of the listener – both the viewer of the film; and, within the film itself, the strangely diffident male driver.

The genre of the narrative, too, is important. Stories about being stranded on an isolated island are part of a tradition that occurs throughout history and across different media – from the epic poetry of *The Odyssey*, through the invention of the novel with *Robinson Crusoe*, to the televisual extravaganza of *Lost* – and are all essentially metaphors for the idea of selfhood, for discovering oneself anew in a newly discovered land.

*Drive In*, then, is simply one more manifestation of this archetypal fable – and as such, the woman's story becomes a kind of paean to the magic of storytelling itself; a celebration of the enduring ability to summon up a convincing representation of this mystical, mythical island world through the power of words alone. In that sense, the whole film can be seen as a rebuttal to such recent mega-budget productions as, precisely, *Lost* (a poster for which, incidentally, zips past the car window at one stage – virtually the only recognizable feature in the anonymous, rain-blurred urban landscape): a declaration of belief that narrative can be supremely effective without any simplistic recourse to lavish visual spectacle.

Indeed, the fact that the central story is told verbally means that the imagery of *Drive In* is able to carry a parallel narrative – to create the

feeling, never fully articulated, but certainly palpable, of a strained, lugubrious, oddly acrimonious relationship between the female passenger and the male driver. And despite the apparent dislocation between the visual setting and the island narrative, Croft has structured his shots in order to tease out a sense of allusion between the two narrative strands: the way the camera cuts away when the woman pauses in her story; the looks which she directs at the man during certain key incidents; most pertinently, the correspondence between the environment of the island, with the woman's description of the protagonist gazing out to sea, and the interior of the car, with the point-of-view shots looking out the windows into the watery darkness beyond. Although it's never made explicit, it's hard not to take the woman's account of the island and its two inhabitants as some form of intended allegory about the car and its two occupants – certainly, there's the sense that both spaces are somehow sealed off, insulated, isolated from the rest of the world.

This feeling of solipsism and enclosure becomes even more acute once the main formal aspect of *Drive In* emerges: its cyclical nature; the way the end of the film loops back to the beginning – or, more accurately, the fact that there is no end or beginning, only an endless, beginningless circularity. When it's first noticed, it seems startling, playful, even amusing. Gradually, however, as the sense of repetition sinks in, it starts to become more insidious and malevolent – inescapable, like the island itself; relentless, like the car journey with no start or finish. The sense is of the narrative having completely taken over; of a story that refuses to die, to submit any longer to human control, but that has instead overwhelmed and imprisoned its characters, its narrator, even its listeners. Rather than doing its proper job of delineating past and future time, the narrative seems to have broken free of the human psyche and manifested itself, invisibly yet immanently, in the present – with its presence, indeed, erasing all temporal distinctions, because all events within its cycle are simultaneously both past and future.



Stuart Croft - 'Drive In' (production still), 2007

It's worth speculating, then, given narrative's role in the formation of the self, what sort of selfhood could hypothetically result from Croft's vision of an endlessly repeating narrative. The answer might well be along the lines described in famous case histories by the neuroscientist Oliver Sacks: some sort of traumatic impairment that stops an individual from forming new memories, that cuts them off from any subjective awareness of time, so that they only exist in a kind of permanent limbo state. And, actually, that's a pretty accurate description of the protagonist's personality and situation in *Drive In* – of his apparent inability each time it happens to remember, or at least remark upon, the fact of his having washed ashore on an island previously; of his purgatorial existence, poised halfway between selfless, romantic bliss and morbid self-analysis.

There is, perhaps, one moment in the narrative when he tries to break free from his cyclical fate, one small but significant attempt. Tellingly, it occurs when he comes to write his own autobiographical novel. His inclusion of details from his life before his island adventures – the job in software management, the fact he has a family – hardly seems to make for the most riveting of accounts; yet in referring to a past that resides outside the parameters of the main narrative, it represents the foundation of new story being laid, one that reaches beyond the perpetual present which contains him – as if he were trying to autobiographize his way to freedom.

It doesn't work, of course. His female companion simply derides his efforts as being no different from any other desert island story – thereby reinforcing the endless circularity of their existence; and so too with the occupants of the car, destined to remain eternally locked within their uncomfortable, solipsistic relationship. In that sense, the ultimate horror of Croft's piece is the suggestion that, in the face of culture's overwhelming narrative onslaught, all such attempts at individuation remain utterly, inevitably hopeless.

*Gabriel Coxhead*

## Biography

Stuart Croft is an artist-filmmaker based in London. Since graduating from Chelsea College of Art in 1998, he has made 14 films and shown his work widely in galleries and museums in the UK, Europe and the USA, including: Site Gallery, Sheffield; FACT, Liverpool; Kunsthalle Luzern; MuKHA\_Media, Antwerp; Royal Academy, London; Medea BB15, Linz; Fred [London] Ltd, London; Galleria Civica di Modena; REIS, Antwerp; PS1/MoMA, New York; Fiedler Contemporary, Cologne; Galerie Pristine, Monterrey; White Box, New York; Chisenhale Gallery, London; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Gasworks Gallery, London. Stuart Croft is currently a lecturer at the Royal College of Art.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

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written to accompany the exhibition

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