**An interview with Hope Dickson Leach**

**By Neil Fox**

Hope Dickson Leach: Hello

MAI Journal: Hello, are you ok?

HDL: Yep, lying on the floor, my usual position.

MAI: Is that a work process thing?

HDL: It is. I always lie on the floor to write.

MAI: A lot of creative people work in bed

HDL: I try not to work in bed unless I’ve got a real crisis deadline. Then, it’s the only place I can be.

MAI: Now I know an intricate part of your process. I feel very privileged.

HDL: The word process makes it sound really formal, like there’s a plan to all of this.

MAI: As long as something happens in the end it works, and is justified

HDL: (laughing) That’s a good way to think about it, there’s got to *have been* a process I suppose, to reach a result.

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Hope Dickson Leach had a significant 2017. The year saw the acclaimed release of her debut feature film as writer/director *The Levelling* (2016)*.* The film was featured in the top 30 of the *Sight and Sound* end of year poll as well as Mark Kermode’s top 10. Having previously been announced as a BAFTA Breakthrough Brit, she went on to win a Scottish BAFTA for writing for film and television. As well as these achievements Hope is respected in British film culture and industry for her feminist views and for co-founding *Raising Films,* an organisation committed to improving conditions and opportunities for parents and carers in filmmaking. She won the inaugural IWC Filmmaker Bursary award, established to support emerging filmmakers, at the 2016 BFI London Film Festival. This long-form conversation with MAI contributing editor Neil Fox took place over Skype and Email in November 2017.

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MAI: I was listening to an interview with Greta Gerwig recently and she was talking about the importance of seeing *Beau Travail* (dir. Denis, 1999)*,* seeing Claire Denis’s name on the end credits and having that kind of moment of identification that women made films and the importance of visibility of women in all kinds of roles in filmmaking. I wondered if there was a similar moment for you, and what that moment was where you realised that ‘this is not just something I want to do, but something I can do’…

HDL: I grew up in Hong Kong watching mostly American films so I think one of the biggest moments was the first time I saw a Ken Loach film. I had a revelation about British Cinema and that films didn’t have to be Hollywood studio films. That was an important thing for me. I then spent a long time being obsessed with cinema but never thinking I could be a storyteller. I wanted to be Sherry Lansing, which is rather strange now I think about it. I always thought I would be a producer. Then I saw *Ratcatcher* (dir. Ramsay, 1999) and that was the moment for me. I’d started working at the Edinburgh Film Festival and we had a screening of it. I watched it with some other women I was working there with and we were all just sobbing and blown away. It was the same emotionally as when I saw *Ladybird Ladybird* (dir. Loach, 1994)butit was also different I think, because I was in Scotland and she was a Scottish filmmaker and people I knew, knew Lynne. Although, it was less the fact she was a woman and more the humanity of the person, the idea that she was a real person that existed and lived here and knew people I was sitting in a room with, that demystified the otherness of cinema for me. Being a woman wasn’t an articulated problem for me, something I ever worried about, but as I get older I can see not only how that stood in my way but also how I have adapted myself in ways that were invisible to me. It’s a process of unpicking all the obstacles in front of you that stop you from making work.

MAI: I guess at the time they just felt like the obstacles and struggles everyone faces to get work made but then latterly you can reflect and see aspects that were gender related…

HDL: Absolutely, there are some you see afterwards and see that you couldn’t have done anything about, decisions made by people in positions of power, to stop you creating work, and those are the ones that we must all rail against. I think the ones I get more hung up on are the ones that I put in my own way, where I suddenly think I’ve been stopping myself making work or getting things done by worrying about what people think of me, or if I’m being too fussy for example. It’s those insidious things that stop you behaving in a certain way. I’ve never really felt the pressure of being a woman because I’ve always been just so bloody minded but also, possibly, because of the way my parents brought me up. I always thought I could do whatever I wanted and I was very privileged and had a very good education. I never felt that there were people putting boundaries on me and I am realising as I get older what invisible boundaries there were.

For example, it becomes harder and harder to make work of any value the more I do it because I question myself more and I judge myself more and even though the craft might get easier the value of it becomes more questionable. Is it enough? Is what I’m doing enough? Was I true to myself? Sometimes I think about 16-year old Hope who was absolutely fearless and I wonder, what have I lost, where has that [girl] gone? As much as I love getting older, and becoming wiser about lots of things, sometimes I do always fear these other things that are pressing down on me, preventing me. It just becomes harder because you are battling with all the demons all the time.

MAI: As someone who has just gone through your body of film work to date though, what was fascinating to the critic and scholar in me was seeing a real honing of a sensibility. It’s so clear, although admittedly maybe not conscious. What was amazing was seeing the threads through the work and how the [unconscious] things you are interested in as an artist and filmmaker become so honed as you go through your work chronologically. While you may struggle to articulate that as a practitioner, and that’s part of a practitioner’s struggle, the work definitely stands as a testament to someone engaging with significant things that matter to them and trying to find new, unique, personal ways to address those things…

HDL: Tell me, tell me what it is!

MAI: I will do when we get there…

HDL: That’s really interesting and really nice to hear. One of the things I find really hard and I’m sure most practitioners and creators find very hard are the things that don’t get made. They live on in my body of work in a very real way. So, while you’re looking at a body of work of stuff that gets made what I look at are the things that are missing. It creates a feeling of, have I mis-stepped? It’s not that I’m not proud of the things I’ve done but sometimes you look at stuff and go, God, there’s another path I thought I would go down and I haven’t gone down there. Which is not to say I’m not happy but I feel like I’m constantly having to try and be honest and at the same time ask myself if I’m frustrated with the gaps in the filmography?

Also, Andrea Arnold said after *American Honey* (2016), ‘this is the first film that really feels like me’ and I wonder, is that something that’s much harder for women, to get the films made that feel as honest and truthful as possible? Because, maybe it takes four films before you can do that because maybe some of your initial ideas you never get permission to make. There is this pressure as a female artist to ensure that your voice be much clearer and more established *before* you are going to be allowed to make the films that you think reflect your voice. As a male filmmaker…

MAI: …you get leeway in a way that you don’t if you’re a female filmmaker…

HDL: You get leeway. Some of your films may fit into the existing marketplace in more obvious ways so you don’t have those years of developing projects that some people believe in but ultimately don’t get made. You don’t have the kind of gap that Amma Assante had between her first and second feature of ten years. Lynne Ramsay has made four films now and this is someone who has been around for twenty years. Who knows why she has taken that long but it seems that women do take a lot longer and yet are expected to respond to this idea of a ‘voice’ that is declared in their first film and very often maybe the first film you make isn’t the ‘voice’ that you’re going to be. For example, Ben Wheatley’s first film is quite different from his later films.

MAI: Those gaps feels like less of a choice for female filmmakers than say for Terrence Malick who can take as long as he wants between *Days of Heaven* (1978) and *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and is revered for it. That doesn’t feel like a choice that female filmmakers could even make because the idea of coming back after a twenty-year gap and being able to pick up where they left off is so slim because it’s hard to get another one made off the back of a successful project….

HDL: Look at Julie Dash. She makes television and, not to speak down to television but, it’s ridiculous that this incredible artist is in our midst all this time and it took Ava DuVernay to bring her and all these other filmmaking voices to episodic television. It’s great and they are doing great work there but I want to see their films as well. I want to see a new Julie Dash film. I want to see a new DeMane Davis film. It’s very disheartening.

It’s not just that though. I remember being at film school and people saying they were going to be like Terrence Malick and take their time between projects, as if they had a choice. The industry changes all the time, and the way people get to make films changes all the time and at every stage of your career you have totally different options available to you. One of the reasons it was appealing for me to come back from the States after studying [at NYU], in some ways, was the idea of national funding, of the BFI, that was going to help me as an emerging filmmaker. if I’d stayed in the States maybe I would have made my first film much more quickly. Who knows? I don’t. That’s why I went to America in the first place, because I felt that people were making work without being given permission and I thought that was very liberating. I thought it was a very healthy thing in the American film industry, that they didn’t have that soft (BFI) money, and people took more risks and there was no stamp of approval needed. You didn’t need that to access other funds, you just needed to find the right people. But, it’s hard everywhere. It’s always difficult talking about why it takes so long to make films because it’s hard for everyone and it’s hard everywhere and occasionally people get to make films very quickly and they do really well. That doesn’t mean they then have amazing careers. I guess I’m just saying that for balance because generally I do believe it’s harder for women and we know the stats are there, and for women of colour it’s even harder. They just don’t get the jobs.

MAI: While everyone knows it’s hard for anyone to get anything made, because of the factors and logistics of getting a film funded and then into production, but when you know there are also gender, political and cultural factors that prohibit people from getting work made it does feel even more insidious that there hasn’t been more of a groundswell for a more diverse group of filmmakers before the recent groundswells in the industry and media. There’s such a self-serving nature to filmmaking, which is understandable to a degree because everyone wants to get their work made but it so much work has been made through the exploitation of and at the expense of other people. What was long understood as rumour has recently become confirmed a reality…

HDL: I have so many emotions about what’s been going on recently. It’s so extraordinary. When it first hit the headlines, I thought ‘why is this in the headlines? This isn’t news’ and then I was really happy that it was news, that people were treating it seriously and saying ‘no, this is news’. I genuinely think the only reason this has happened is because everybody hated Harvey [Weinstein] so much. It took someone with that much power who was really hated for people to get behind this. There are so many stories of people, some of which have come out some which haven’t but we are waiting for them to emerge, that feature really big and famous names who are very much loved from a public point of view that I thought this kind of thing would never happen. It took a despised figure to get the groundswell. I’m going to give props to Ronan Farrow too. This is a man whose sister has been abused and shamed and denied publicly for years and he has always stood up for her. He has taken his white privilege and the position of access that he has and is also clearly a very good reporter. He’s done something brave and special - you’ve got to celebrate the journalists in this as well.

It’s hit every axis of life, all over the world. People are talking about this kind of thing in government and that’s great. It’s great. Maybe feminism is going to see a massive shift. Maybe. Maybe sexual harassment and abuse is the thing that finally makes people understand that it’s not okay to treat women differently. That’s also desperately sad to me, if it literally comes down to charged criminal behaviour. It’s very early days though, and I don’t know if it will just all go away. It could. I feel like the only thing that could ensure real change is a change in the law and policy, like we saw with health and safety at work in the eighties and nineties. It makes me despair but generally I think it’s an amazing thing that’s going on right now and I don’t know what it’s going to look like in a month’s time. It just seems to shift every day.

MAI: When I’m teaching, I’m talking to students and saying ‘some of you are about to enter this field with this knowledge, which was only a rumour and a myth before, now it’s been revealed as truth, what are you going to do with that knowledge, how are you going to change the culture?’. Maybe where the change will come, hopefully more men who don’t behave that way because they think they have to in order to be successful in the film industry [or want to more worryingly], and more women who are able to and confident to stop it at source. Plus, more men supporting them when it happens. I see longer term hope because the news cycle changes so quickly that unless there are prosecutions it all can disappear because of the nature of where we get that information.

HDL: The machine of filmmaking is very much one of necessity and you can see the machinery readjusting itself. The recasting of Kevin Spacey with Christopher Plummer [in Ridley Scott’s *All The Money In The World*, 2017] felt like this machine in action. They knew that film would not be able to make money because it was coming out so close to recent events. No one would go and see it. So, they felt like they had to do it. It’s very much a capitalist necessity. This idea that we are in control of the machine I still struggle with.

We put ourselves at risk every day when we go through this machine because there are going to be things that are sucked out of us and we are going to be asked to make decisions and compromises all the way that are beholden to this machine. That’s why it’s so exhausting as someone who is not a white CIS man going through it. There’s so much psychic exhaustion to battle that machine all the time and to say ‘no, it is necessary, because the story I’m telling operates on these terms. You clearly think this story is operating in a different way so it’s not necessary to your vision of the film’. You’re constantly giving a pound of flesh to it in order to make something.

MAI: That takes me to your film *Ladies in Waiting* (2005)*.* I think it has a lot of resonance with the contemporary moment. It feels like the most overtly political film you made prior to your feature debut *The Levelling.* It’s very much about power structures, very much about women navigating male power structures which are off-screen and in the shadows. The women are separated from the male or a unisex domain but the influence of the patriarchy infects the situation the young women in the girls’ school in the film find themselves in. It reminded me of Diane Kurys’s *Peppermint Soda* (1977)and Leontine Sagan’s *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) *-* both sensuous and excoriating portraits of young women together. *Ladies in Waiting* stood out amongst your other short film work and felt like you were channelling a righteous energy into the film. I wondered if it was made a time when you felt like this was something you needed to say and needed to be more direct in how your work addressed things that you are passionate about and see around you in the culture.

HDL: I’m really pleased about that. It wasn’t very loved when it was made. It was my non-thesis film at film school. A lot of my teachers were like ‘why did you do the thing where you swapped the kids with the adults? It would have been really good without that’ [in the film the teenage girls’ voices are dubbed by older actors]. But that was the whole point of making it. I really wanted to look at the tools that cinema gives you and all the things you can do. Very rarely do we make use of them as filmmakers. Very rarely do we use the whole cinematic brain. We use parts of it. I wanted to use double casting. I wanted to have a musical number. I wanted to do everything. Thematically though, I think I’m obsessed with how women in groups amongst themselves, where men don’t physically interact, absorb the things that men and the world around them tell them they ought to think and how they ought to be and how they are bullied into it.

I had a really shit time at boarding school. I was very miserable there. It had a lot to do with wanting to define myself. I kept getting hurt and I kept making bad decisions. I would go back home during the holidays and that would be difficult also. Being a teenager was hard. This film was meant to be the second of a trilogy. The first one was *Cavities* (2004)*.* Both the main characters are called Nina and there was going to be a third film again based on the idea that you make choices for the best reasons but they take years to get over. In the moment, you stand up for yourself or you betray someone or you listen to your Mum because you want someone to love you [as in *Cavities*] but this defines you and you adopt behaviour that then takes years for you to not only identify where it came from and forgive yourself for but to cut out of your life again.

I think there is something very interesting about being a teenager very few teenage films actually deal with. They assume you get through it and you come out the other side and that wasn’t my experience of being a teenager at all. I feel like I am over it now, thank God, but it can be a really damaging time. That’s what those two films were about really, as much as anything else. I think it shows how present all these themes that I think about now, about the position of women in the world, were in my upbringing and I was absorbing and processing it all. I don’t know how often you see angry women on screen and it’s something I like to see.

MAI: It’s interesting to hear you talk about a planned trilogy and your time at boarding school because one of the themes I detected in pretty much everything I watched of yours was young women trying to make their way in the world and understand what it means to grow up and be a female adult. Particularly through the lens of family, but definitely through questions such as ‘how do I do this?’ and ‘how do I find my place and who I am?’. That seems to me present in pretty much all the short films you’ve made available on your website, except *Wedding Night* (2012)*.* It’s there in different ways, very present. The other thing that is present, which is obviously also very present in *The Levelling,* is the effect of grief and/or trauma on a family unit. How things that happen impact those around us. I know you didn’t write *Parliamo Glasgow* (2009)but still there’s the sense in that film’s central family that big things are being dealt with and you are interested in *how* they are dealt with. While you may not have made the trilogy, it feels like all your work is interested in exploring these themes and using young women as a way of accessing those themes and ideas. How aware are you when you are working, or after your films are released, when people tell you what they think it’s about or want to know what it’s about, of things that recur? Do you see your work differently to critical responses to it?

HDL: Ideas of someone trying to find home and responses to grief are things I’m aware of. This is a really boring answer to this question but, it’s hard if you go through the kinds of [funding] applications you need to go through to make work to not identify themes. While I was making short films, I wasn’t really aware but trying to make a feature is different and I was asking how does it connect to, for example, *The Dawn Chorus* (2006). What I was talking about earlier, about having to define yourself, feels like something you have to do now as a young, emerging filmmaker. You have to be able to talk about yourself and your voice in a way that is actually really unhealthy. It makes you define yourself in ways I don’t think anyone should have to. Filmmakers are being asked to pigeonhole themselves into something, which if you’re really supporting an artist’s exploration of the world, you shouldn’t want. I dipped a toe into the visual arts world a couple of years ago with a project that I was trying to get made and they said it was far too developed and that’s not how the visual arts world works. If they know what it is, they’re not interested in helping you. It was such a different way of working.

MAI: Another thing about watching your films was that they are all shot through with strangeness. It was so great to see the shorts after *The Levelling* and see that moments of the abstract or surreal or the strange have been present and honed across your career, eventually finding a home in your debut feature. There is always a real attention to form. You mentioned the toolbox in respect of *Ladies in Waiting* and I wondered where that storytelling impulse comes from to inject the work in that way, so the work can never be easily pigeonholed into social realism or straight drama etc...

HDL: Part of it is the way I see the world. I’m quite bored with realism. I’ve always found absurd things funnier than obviously comic things. I’ve also always thought, ‘what else is there?’ The idea of cinema being a visual art form when the things I tend to be interested in are things you can’t actually see presents a very particular challenge and that’s a challenge I want to meet. I want to find a way to communicate things that aren’t usually communicated or are difficult to communicate. The things that interest me in this visual art-form and stories are the things that are beyond the literal. Sometimes the best way to do that is through straight conversation and having subtext in the air but I like the idea there are other tools we can use.

MAI: Where do you think your cinema and cinema in general are headed? We’ve talked about a potential watershed moment in the culture but it feels like we are in a watershed moment for the form as well. I wondered where you thought it was all going to go and whether there are filmmakers you look at and go ‘that’s the kind of identifiable voice and career I aspire to’…

HDL: I am obsessed with what process does. I think the relationship between how you make films and what their content is is essential and in many instances, lends the work meaning. One of the things that is interesting right now is looking at how it’s changing. How films get made and how people get them financed. How people do anything. I do believe that what happens next for the relationship between cinema and television and online platforms is going to make a massive difference to how anybody makes work. You can’t raise money in the same ways.

Certainly, there are people whose careers I love and am excited by. I’ve always been a big fan of Rick [Richard] Linklater because I love the way he makes films that are very ‘him’ and distinct, quite experimental, and then he will make big, mainstream films but they are still brilliant stories, well told, with great heart. I’ve always admired people who can do that, who can do both. That’s important to me. I’m very lucky to be working with screenwriters now on other projects, projects not written by me, and this idea of what you bring to it as a director when you are not the writer as well, the idea of authorship is something I’m preoccupied by. I’m loving it. I love the collaborative process so I’m really excited to be doing that, but I’ll always want to make *my* stuff. I’m a massive Jane Campion fan as well and *Top Of The Lake*, the first series especially, was extraordinary and one of the most exciting film to TV leaps by a filmmaker that I’ve seen so far, apart from *Twin Peaks* of course,which is a landmark thing in my life.

I’m also very aware that there is a path of one’s own that has to be figured out and followed that is going to be dictated by many things. Whether it’s because I have to make films differently because I have children or because I don’t live in London. Because I’ve gone for long periods of not making anything, and just doing a lot of writing, I feel like I have it in me to keep pushing through to the other side. It would nice just to be allowed to make work. That would be nice. But I also wonder what you’d lose if you didn’t have to fight for every step. Maybe sometimes when you look at the careers of filmmakers who have a blank cheque from Hollywood, you think, ‘well, their films are becoming less interesting and less about humanity over the years’. Maybe that’s why women tend to make films that are more urgent and engaged with humanity.

MAI: I know you are a big fan of *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (dir. Scorsese, 1974)*,* are there any (other) key films where you saw women represented in ways that felt like you were seeing yourself represented or resonated with you or you recognised as being personally significant?

HDL: *Wild at Heart* (dir. Lynch, 1990) and *True Romance* (dir. Scott, 1993)were massive films for me in terms of badass female characters who were blonde and sexy and powerful and relentless. I dyed all my underwear after seeing *True Romance,* I had neon pink and blue underwear for years.

MAI: That blue, that blue was so powerful…

HDL: That turquoise, right. So, those were big. I think the two other characters that were most important to me were Elliott in *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (dir. Spielberg, 1982)[and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* (dir. Lucas, 1977)]. *E.T.* remains one of my favourite films of all time and Elliott was a crucial character for me. I think it’s because I was a younger sibling. I think it’s also because I never saw myself in those formative years differently. I identified with Elliott. I realise now how damaging that can be and every time I see trailers or kid’s television and young people’s films now I think ‘why are they all boys?’. There are going to be generations of girls with the same experience. I was also always Luke Skywalker. I was never Leia. Luke all the way.

Cinema is dangerous in that way, because we respond to what we see on screen, but then I also think ‘what’s wrong with me being Luke?’. As a woman, you tend to be quite lucky. It’s harder for my sons to say ‘I’m Leia’. My son’s favourite *Harry Potter* character is Hermione, by a mile. I want to make sure that’s okay as well. We do need more films where the main character through whom we experience the story is not just a white male, but we also need to ensure experiences aren’t exclusionary because cinema should be for everyone.

MAI: A danger also comes from being told later on in life that you can’t be Luke because ‘you’re a girl’ even though Luke is a fictional character and that confusion is so damaging. The power of the big screen is often in that identification and being told, after being denied objects of identification, that you can’t identify with what you’ve seen has a toxic power…

HDL: This is one of the reasons why television is so great right now because its supporting characters get full lives. They have a whole arc, a full journey.

MAI: I loved the credits on *Wedding Night* that thanked the children for their Mummies’ time away. I am a big fan of credits that reflect the true nature of filmmaking rather than the rigid boxes. It struck me though as part of greater visibility for your feminism, around Raising Films particularly. So, in closing, I wanted to know how you feel your feminism (wo)manifests itself in your filmmaking practice?

HDL: I’m very interested in person-centred systems, both in life and in filmmaking. I’ve had so many bad experiences where people have focused on the work, and not the creator, and it made me realise how strongly I believe our needs, as artists and as human beings, must be recognised in order to do good work, and in order to feel whole. The question of what women need is one that still feels like an indulgence today, which is an outrage, and I think where my feminism can be most clearly identified. What do we need and why aren’t these needs being addressed? I think you can see it in my characters, and I am trying to address this in how I work too. The way I like to approach any collaboration is to think about what the people need to do their work. And to not question them. I feel that we ought to be trusted to know what we need - and if we don’t at first, it’s because we haven’t been given this muscle (to know) and so we need to be allowed to grow it. My need is simple: I need to be listened to and taken seriously. That’s it. When this need isn’t met, I get incredibly angry and I know I’m not alone.

What’s going on right now around the world with the sexual assault revelations shows very clearly that women are furious at not being listened to, and that anger is real and powerful. But I don’t want to have to use my anger to make things happen. I’ve spent many years being angry, and it’s exhausting. But I know that I have enormous privilege as a white, able-bodied, cis-feminist, which I acknowledge. I appreciate how important anger has been and continues to be in the fight for equality, and it isn’t a choice, however much I want it to be. But I also know how destructive anger is, on a personal level, and I want to for us all to be heard and respected. That would be so restful. And it’s the thought of that restfulness for all of us that drives me. So, with the work I do with Raising Films and the way I try and set up my work and my life, it’s all about creating spaces (physical and psychic) that allow myself and my collaborators to be heard, and for our needs to be met. If that’s the baseline, then what follows can be genuinely creative and intentional. And then if it calls for anger, so be it - but collaborative anger has a quality to it that can be so much more empowering. Hopefully we will get to a space of real rest one day. In the meantime, I channel my anger into my characters, who are stronger than I am.