Cinematic Practice Does Politics

An Interview with Julia Loktev, 11 & 13 October 2008

Julia Loktev is a filmmaker based in New York City. Her first film, Moment of Impact, won the director's award at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. Her installation work has been featured at both the Tate Modern and PS1 galleries. Day Night Day Night (2006) is her second feature film, and has won numerous awards, including the Youth Prize at Cannes Director's Fortnight. She is currently working on a third feature film. I had the pleasure of interviewing Julia in New York City in October 2008.

I spoke with Julia about the relationship between filmmaking and politics, specifically referring to her film Day Night Day Night. The film is about a suicide-bomber on her way to Times Square to detonate.

Julia Loktev: JL
Nasrin Himada: NH

NH: Hi Julia.

JL: Hi Nasrin. This is an attempt at an interview take two.

NH: Yes. Take two.

JL: Because we had a conversation yesterday and in some ways I came away from it feeling like I had flunked an exam. Your friend Heather said something very funny, she said, 'do you feel like you're going to go back to school and Brian Massumi is going to retroactively change your grade for your thesis.' I have been out of an academic sphere for so long, and using academic language can be taken for granted when you're in the midst of it, and then the vocabulary that you use on an everyday basis sort of slips away. You realize you no longer understand this language. It's like anything else, you know when I haven't spoken Russian for a while, my Russian gets quite rusty, and I feel like my

academic speak is so rusty it doesn't even move at this point. I am not sure if coffee or beer is enough to lubricate it into moving. So, in some ways I think we have to bridge the language somehow because I don't know how to begin to talk about micropolitics. Frankly, because I am not entirely sure what micropolitics is, and I am embarrassed to admit that I am not sure what micropolitics is.

NH: I felt uneasy, as well. Because I wasn't sure what my intention was in trying to have an artist talk about her work in relation to politics. What is my intention in doing that? Why is that important for me? Why it is important for me to think about politics in relation to everyday practice and what do I mean by that? I realized it was a chance for me to ask what is politics at this point, and how can we talk about it in relation to cinema. I wanted to think about it in a way that takes the conversation away from content, from politics as content. I wanted to get at the question of how art does politics—as a way to experiment with creating techniques—and how does this process of art making begin to open up potential for a new articulation of politics that cannot be known yet but that is based in how one practices, and that is really about process and experimentation. What does art do in terms of enabling new thoughts for how the political can be articulated?

JL: There are ways of finding a common vocabulary, but I do find myself slipping back. When you talk about micropolitics, and when you explain to me what it is, I think I understand it, and yet the minute I attempt to talk about it, I fumble and find myself slipping back into talking about macropolitics. I don't know how to begin to talk about this in relation to my work because then I slip back into the larger issues, which isn't really what we should be talking about. It seems that the minute I try to put it into language I exactly kind of defeat what it's suppose to be –

NH: I wonder if that's maybe because I am trying to talk about something that we can't necessarily talk about or describe, or that's attainable somehow in verbal language.

JL: I mean just because I can't talk about it doesn't mean that somebody else can't, which is something I like about making work. It's a kind of jumping-off point for somebody else to add to it and to work from it; maybe it can give somebody an idea even if they disagree with it, it can start something, and that is maybe the most political thing that I can do in my work. I am not used to

thinking about my work in a kind of direct political sense. I don't think of it as a call to action, as a recipe for behaviour, as a staking out of a position. But for me the most important thing is can it leave room for thought; can it leave room for argument; can it leave room for disagreement; can somebody walk out of the film and not be so certain of what they feel. This destabilizing is maybe the most political thing that I can do. Because so often when we think about political cinema it isn't necessarily about destabilizing—especially documentaries, but also in fiction—there are a lot of very politically motivated films now that are basically preaching to the choir. They're about confirming a position and making you feel safer in your assumptions, and you see this all the time.

Just the other day (on a plane)I saw a film. I am trying to remember what happened. There was an immigrant couple, an Arab man and an African woman I believe, who, through complicated circumstances befriended this white middle-class professor. The Arab guy teaches the white professor how to drum and they become friends. Then one day, while carrying the drum on the New York subway the Arab man gets pulled over by the cops and thrown into immigration detention because his papers had expired. And then it becomes all about the white guy realizing how awful immigration detention is, and lobbying for his new Arab friend's release. And, of course, everyone who works at the detention is very rude and mean in a kind of exaggerated way, just to drive the point home. And the people on the plane next to me were nice good-hearted liberals–we'd just been excitedly talking about the Democratic Convention – who were gushing about what a wonderful movie this was. And of course, yes, the political position is correct, but really there's something so simplistic about this, and that's a good example of what gets considered liberal political cinema now. You walk out of the movie feeling very satisfied that you have correct thoughts and that others think like you. Again, I have no problem with the position, but I think that truly political work should not make you feel satisfied with what you know; it should make you feel a little bit unsatisfied and a little bit unstable with some of your assumptions, a little uneasy. There is a kind of smugness in that film—I can't remember the name, but I think there are a lot of films now like that and there certainly have been several films about suicide bombers where everything is very clear, and you come out feeling that everything you know has been confirmed. It's an illusion that you learned something, but, in fact, you learned what you already knew.

NH: And it's interesting how there is a formula in that example of the film you talked about, a cinematic formula is constructed, right, in terms of helping you get to that satisfaction or self-indignation.

JL: Exactly. You get that catharsis in the most traditional, conventional way. The form is absolutely conventional, and then you walk out of the film feeling satisfied. That feeling of satisfaction is disturbing to me. You become the equivalent of a couch potato. It's all been thought and digested for you and presented to you in nice easy morsels, and at no point has something that you assumed to be true been truly confronted. And that's a lot of what constitutes "political films" now.

NH: They're not dangerous to thought. They don't disturb what has already been thought.

JL: We all want to believe that they are dangerous to somebody else. People have the sense that 'Of course, *I* knew all of this, but there is somebody out there who needed to learn it.' It's the way people approach Michael Moore films—I am using that as a kind of very shorthand example—because there are plenty of other films like that, both fiction and documentary. People say, 'Well yes, of course, I knew everything he's saying, but you know those *other* people needed to learn this, to *them* this is dangerous.' But of course it's not those "other people" that are going to this movie. The people to whom it might be possibly dangerous are in no position to receive it or have no interest in it. So, in fact, the people who go to see it are the ones who feel very safe and who don't feel the slightest bit endangered by the argument, usually. So, what does it mean to be dangerous, and to whom? Something should be dangerous to yourself, in some way, not to some imaginary other.

NH: I start to think about how cinema today experiments with technique. For every new project we begin we engage with an experiment that is going to create a set of techniques, right, depending on what the project is and depending on the process. I was thinking, how do you then pay attention to your own practice (in how you create your techniques) to try and do things differently each time you make a film or experiment with an idea? How do you think about what you want to do that's going to be different or challenging? I don't even know if that's answerable.

JL: I am trying to remember who it was that said something so beautiful, something to the effect of, 'I set out to do what everybody else does, but it just comes out different." So, I don't know if I set out to make it somehow different. I try to think in terms of formal approaches—how can the sound and the image reflect the feeling that I want to get at in a particular point. I don't necessarily set out with a system, and yet it becomes a system. I think on some level I am a formalist. But it's always somehow a reflection of something I am trying to get across in that particular film. In the example of *Day Night Day Night*, I thought of it as two different halves. I thought here is a film about this girl where more than half the film is spent planning and preparing, spent almost entirely in interiors, in isolation. And then she's thrown out into the street, in the middle of Times Square, in the middle of a crowd, attempting to carry out this action. So then, it became a question of how do you formally reflect that inherent difference between the two parts of the film. She's in this vacuum of the hotel room; it's the process of planning, and everything seems very clear in a plan. It's like an architectural drawing, it's schematic. The film had to formally reflect that at that point. There weren't a lot of colours, everything was grid-like, extra details were eliminated. The sound in this part is not really about the environment that she's in. She's kind of in this closed chamber, so it should be just the sound that she's making in the world, the sound of the impact of her movement on the world around her, I don't need to hear the neighbour's TV in the room next to her, that would be something other—it's not about that. Whereas, once you go out onto the street in Times Square, everything is coming in from all sides, so then how do you construct the image and the sound in a way that reflects that feeling and that sense of a girl in the midst of this crowd in Times Square. The formal decisions also came partly out of necessity—using a very loose camera simply because it was impossible to have rigidly framed shots in Times Square. So, then you adapt to it, you transform a constraint into a decision.

Usually, I have some harebrained reason why I want things, and then I make up rules for why it has to be this way. I write down all kinds of rules for myself. But it has to be, in some way, a reflection of the places and the faces we film. I am working on this film now. It's going to be shot in Georgia (country) and we're still working on the casting; I feel like there are things about the film that I know at this stage—I mean yes, there is a script written—but until I am actually in the space with the actors, until I see the actors' faces, until I know who they are, there is a lot that I can't know. I can't get to that next phase of visualizing how it should be because I need to flesh out these other ideas—in a sense I need to

know what the flesh is, literally. I need to find the flesh, and then figure out how it's going to be in the film because it doesn't come fully formed all at once in my mind. I am not somebody who can visualize a film entirely beginning to end in my head. I think if I can visualize it entirely (beginning to end)there is no reason to make it. There are filmmakers I respect, like Hitchcock, who could visualize a film entirely. I can't. I am simply not capable of it. I need the real world to force me into situations and force me to come up with solutions.

NH: My question to you that I thought about just while you were talking is about how much intuition plays into the work? I guess I am also asking that because I am thinking so much about the kind of process you're talking about when shooting for instance in Times Square and how it becomes about a pragmatic intuitive process somehow.

JL: Yes, I want to be more intuitive, but I am actually by nature a very logical and rigid person. I try to construct little logical games for myself. It forces me to use intuition. If I create a kind of structure then within that structure I can play.

NH: Like going to Times Square with a camera.

JL: Right. You set up the rules of the game. You set up certain parameters, and hopefully you have collaborators that are willing to play with you and be a little bit intuitive in that moment. That's something I always struggle with—wanting to be more intuitive.

NH: I noticed that in *Day Night Day Night* there were a lot of close-up shots on gestures. For example, this occurs in the scene of the first attempt at detonation. The intensity is felt very strongly because of how you shot it using close-ups. These close-up shots focused on people's hands, and the backs of their neck—micro-gestures—while they're waiting to cross the street with the about to become suicide-bomber. You didn't focus on their faces but their body movements in parts as they stood waiting.

JL: Yes. I think a lot of the time I tend to focus on hands or on body movements—I was going to say more than face but that's not true, as much as face but more than words—because there is so much that can come across in how a hand moves, in how a person moves their body in that moment to reflect a feeling. That's so much more interesting to me than what people say. I am interested in the kind of talk that people might be having in a particular situation versus talk that's for the audience's benefit, about explaining something to an audience.

NH: For example, when we hear the suicide-bomber pray.

JL: She had these strange prayers that she did, which I always imagined would be subtitled. That's how I wrote them, to be subtitled. I thought, well, she's speaking English, but you shouldn't talk to your object of faith in the same way you talk to your friend; you have to have some other way of using language. It shouldn't sound like a regular conversation. These prayers are kind of oblique. At the same time, they were taken from real sources, from an adaptation of things that I had come across in my research, like the prayer "Everybody dies. Some people fall from windows and die," that was taken from something I'd read about a Palestinian suicide-bomber video. In the video, he says, "Some people get run over by horses and die, some people fall off sheds..." and listed all these different ways people die, and then said "I want my death to be for you". I adapted it and I brought in a few more methods of death, changed the methods of death, but basically worked off of that.

NH: I think I read somewhere that you also didn't want the audience to grasp onto something she would say that would justify her act or give an explanation for what she was about to do. And yet the prayers kind of give hints at something, especially when she says, "I want this death to be for you," this almost hints at giving a reason for her action.

JL: It's not that I didn't want people to grasp onto some things. It's more that I discovered once I made the film that people grasped onto the tiniest shreds. I mean that was a kind of unintended consequence. So you would have these situations—there is a scene where the organizers [of the suicide bombing mission] are going through her wallet and they're taking her ID and they take a photo of her little brother, and she says, "Can I keep it?" and they refuse. Again, that was a little detail that I drew from an article about this girl that I researched a lot on, a Chechen girl, who set out to be a suicide bomber in Moscow and failed. She said she was kind of sad because they wouldn't let her take a picture of her daughter with her. She just wanted to keep it. It was not that she was trying to do this for her daughter, it was just that she wanted to take the picture of her daughter with her. So, I used this detail and substituted a picture of a little brother, and I've had people make up elaborate narratives that it's all about the little brother. Whereas, I just thought, she knows she's going to die and she wants to have a picture of her little brother, it's not anything more than that. I found that in a vacuum, people started attaching incredible amounts of importance to the slightest detail. So, you almost couldn't have any personal

details because they would be mistaken for "clues." For example, I had to re-write and re-write and re-write the scene toward the end where she calls her parents. I assumed that this is not the type of thing that she has informed her parents she's doing; when she calls, her parents obviously think that she's somewhere else. Wherever she came from she can't just go back.

To me, it was just about a closed door that can't be reopened. I had to re-record it a bunch of times to make the parents nicer and nicer, probably too nice, because people would just go into these elaborate explanations that it was all about the parents, and that she had a fight with her parents. The audience is used to looking for clues that are supposed to mean something or explain everything. I think that's one thing that's often been misinterpreted about my intentions. It wasn't my intention to say that you shouldn't ask why, or that the why is inexplicable, or that there is no why. No, it just happened to be not what this particular story was about. A story is not necessarily the whole story. You can tell a love story where you talk about how two people meet, and you can tell a love story where you don't tell how they met and you just pick it up at the point where they've been married for four years.

NH: Can we talk about the ending of the film now that it has been a couple of years. The ending was really something for me –

JL: Spoiler alert. That's what they do on IMDB, "spoiler alert." I never care. I never care if people tell me the endings of movies. I am always interested in how you get toward something, not what happens. But yeah, we can talk about the end. I was really only interested in making a film about a girl who sets out to be a suicide bomber and fails. I was interested in her failure. The film wasn't about the radicalization of this girl; it wasn't about how she came to make a decision. It was a film about this girl who already made a decision but fails to carry it out.

NH: I've talked to a few people who also watched the film and walked out of it at the end feeling this bodily tension in their gut. For me, that was the case, and for a few friends I went to see it with, for sure. It's an intensity that's felt with the situation that's unfolding on the screen. You walk out of the film feeling, not stressed out, but like you've carried something with you the entire time that's still inarticulable once you leave the cinema.

JL: That's part of the reason why I wanted the credits to be silent, to let people catch their breath again and to just sit with it a little bit. It's always been very quiet when I've done Q &A's after the film and when the lights come back on. There is always this kind of uncomfortable silence. It was like that with my other film too, *Moment of Impact.* And maybe that ties back into what we started out talking about—what the political can be—in thesense that the work is not entirely finished. There is not a sense of a complete arc, something that you've gone through and now you know exactly what you feel, "Yes, I am satisfied." It doesn't necessarily stop where you expected it to. I thought it should be interrupted rather than concluded. So, the end can be a kind of beginning to a conversation, and it's a conversation that doesn't have to involve me and should not involve me most of the time.

My favourite movies are the ones where I don't really know what just happened; I don't know entirely what I just experienced; I don't know what I think about it; there's still some work to be done; and maybe I will never figure out what I saw but I just have that feeling from it. Those are the kind of films that I get very excited by. Something that leaves me a little bit on edge, a little incomplete. I hoped, going back to the ending—my thought about the ending was –

NH: You filmed that yourself too, right?

JL: The last shot I filmed myself because it was supposed to be a kind of shot of nothing that had the potential to be something. It's very difficult to shoot nothing that has the potential to be something. It's very difficult. It's almost like the photograph of the little brother—something can be too overloaded with meaning. At the end, she's looking for a sign, and I suppose a believer can see a sign in anything, where another person might see absolutely nothing. So, I wanted the potential of a sign but possibly the potential for no sign at all. I would go out by myself long after we had edited the film and I would go across from Port Authority, a block away from Times Square, and go out to shoot nothing. I tried thirty takes of nothing and they didn't work very well, and then finally I did manage to shoot nothing. I liked the idea of having a conclusion that people could enter into from different positions, within faith or outside of faith, or in completely different ways. And there is no right or wrong way.

NH: The prayers are a little bit like that too. She doesn't say God, and might not be to a God.

JL: Exactly. She's not naming the object of belief, of her faith.

NH: But one is hinted at. The film plays back and forth with this kind of ambiguity, between belief and non-belief. At times, it's hard to tell what the protagonist is feeling and it's never said—she hardly says anything through out the film. Her facial expression and bodily movements are unreadable, but very pronounced at the same time. It's impossible to reduce it to an emotion. The film remains ambiguous in this way, but the ambiguity of the film is also what makes it so that the experience of watching her is intense. It's very affective.

JL: Sometimes even if you don't know what a character is thinking you have a sense of the rhythm of her breath, the rhythm of her physical actions in that moment. This isn't a girl that you get to know based on knowing her back-story, knowing where she came from, where she grew up, or knowing what she's thinking at this moment. You kind of get to know her based on the motions of her body and motions of her face, based on watching her breathe and being drawn into her breathing. There was this very nice thing that somebody said to me in Buenos Aires at a screening. This girl came to me after and she said, "A few minutes into the film and I felt like I was breathing with her." I thought that was a nice comment. You feel inside this character and under her skin, without ever really knowing her thought process or who she is at all, but you know what her body is doing and how it's responding to everything in terms of how she's moving and different ways that her body reflects degrees of tension and anxiety. All of it is very much about her body; it plays out on her body. I remember when I was casting the girl, I had all these requirements of what I wanted from the girl, and one of things I wrote in my notes was she's someone that events pass through and her face is constantly registering their passing. And then I thought it's not really just her face but also her body. Sometimes, I think you learn more by sitting there with somebody and watching them eat an egg roll than them telling you something.

NH: In one interview I also read you said something about when people try to recollect a traumatic event and talk about what they had just gone through—and this was something you said in the interview that struck me—is the way in which they recalled banal details. Like this one woman, who was there on September 11th, could only recall losing one of her shoes and walking around with a bare foot. This reminded me of the girl and her ritual of eating in the film, which plays a role in how she grounds herself as she moves in the future and past of what's about to happen. She's about to blow herself up.

JL: Exactly. That's what you focus on. Because it's these physical gestures that tie you to the world, tie you to other people, and sometimes that is what you remember from an event, a detail. And the main narrative is what you remember from the retelling of the event, over and over. So you know how the main arc goes, but it's the little detail that grounds you. For me, it made sense to focus on those things. I am very interested in gestures. In the new film I am working on, this very dramatic event happens between this couple while they're travelling, and they absolutely have no way of speaking about it. So, half the film is them going on with their trip but not speaking about the elephant in the room. And the way that this event plays out and the ways they relate to each other—they do everything else but talk about it. So it's how their relationship to each other's bodies changes after the event, how every gesture they make toward each other changes, how they position themselves in relation to each other changes, and how they attempt to negotiate this kind of intimacy of one person approaching the other then withdrawing and taking turns doing this. But mostly this happens through tiny physical gestures, where a moment of reconciliation can be somebody offering you some dried apricots, or a hand that goes into a pocket as opposed to going into your hand becomes an act of betrayal. So it's these small things that you often remember and register because you are responding to the world in physical ways. And sometimes it's about gestures that you have no awareness that you're making and that are much more revealing than what you intend to be doing. One of the nice things about film is that you can focus on things that if you were watching this scene from across the room you wouldn't notice. The movement of a hand can be the heart of a scene, but it would be completely unapparent to somebody watching you at a café.

NH: We watch her, for a long time, eating this bright red candy apple as she is walking toward her destination in Times Square. Again, it was so intense watching her eat for so long. Did you know that she was going to eat a candy apple?

JL: I knew that she was going to eat food that was available in Times Square, street food.

NH: Right, there were the pretzels.

JL: Like the pretzels. And then I saw these candy apples in a store and they were just so beautiful—not the caramel apples, not the brown ones, but those red

glossy ones. I finally understood why they called those guitars or cars "candy apple red," that's the kind of red. I have to confess something, a little cheat. We discovered it was impossible to buy a candy apple in Times Square. They don't sell candy apples in Times Square. So we spent the first four hours of the morning of the shoot going all over New York City trying to find candied apples. So they're not as common as you think. But it seems it's the kind of thing that should be sold in Times Square.

NH: I am going to be a total academic right now and refer to what Gilles Deleuze, in one of his cinema books, calls an affection-image. He talks about it in relation to a close-up; it's usually a close-up, and talks about how the shot constitutes "micro-movements of expression."

JL: Talk about that.

NH: For me, from what I understand from what he's writing about in terms of affection-images, is that it's something where you're instantly affected by what you're seeing on the screen without necessarily recognizing how it's making you feel; it's pre-cognitive, operating outside what he calls spatio-temporal coordinates. It's felt before it can be articulated or reduced to something we can recognize in language. A lot of the time, to explain this, I've heard people use examples of going to see a horror film and describing this moment before it is that you recognize you're scared; so it's that moment before you can determine the emotion as being scared;it's before you can determine or define what has just affected you. And for me, I would say that your film would be an affection-image.

JL: I like the sound of it. I was thinking about this film I saw last week and I am still thinking about it. I don't know how to think about it actually. I am still thinking about the fact that I am still thinking about it but I have absolutely nothing to think about, in the sense that I don't know how to verbally engage with it or think about it in a specific way, or analyse it in a specific way. This is Lucrecia Martel's *A Headless Woman*. I am still thinking about it specifically because it gave me some kind of a feeling but I have no idea what that feeling is; I have no idea really how to talk about it. It wasn't the best film I saw in a long time, nor even the best film I saw this year. But it was utterly mysterious to me. It was about a sensation that I felt while watching it, and I still think about the fact of having this sensation that I can't quite put into words. It strangely stuck to me more than stuck with me—an amorphous feeling that I have no way of speaking about. I

am fascinated by that because usually I could begin to talk about something, but here I don't really know what to say, but I had this sensation while watching it, and to me that alone was interesting.

NH: I feel that when a work attaches itself to me it's usually because I can't say why I liked it or disliked it. So coming to interview you I was nervous because I wasn't sure how to ask questions about a work that did just that—attach itself to me in this sort of sensorial way. Because I feel too that once I begin to talk about a work and try to explain why a work moved me or why I liked a work it's always going to be not exactly that. The effect of the work on me changes and it is no longer that which I had felt once I try to explain it.

JL: Maybe we should have sat here silently and watched each other drink. In general, it's much easier for me to say why I don't like something, because usually the things I don't like are very easy to talk about and easy to define. So it's very easy for me to just bitch. There is a clarity to it. Bad reviews are always juicier than good reviews.

NH: It's easy.

JL: It's very easy. But to talk about why you like something becomes so much more difficult, and then you almost don't want to. I stopped taking film theory classes as an undergrad—very traditional film studies classes where you watched movies and analysed them. I didn't like watching movies and then liking them and then talking about them with people that I didn't necessarily like. I felt like I was sharing something so private and so dear to me that I didn't want to share. I even have a hard time walking out of a movie with a friend and talking about it. I feel like it kills it to talk about it. And at the same time, I feel that films should be jumping-off points for discussion, not necessarily for analysis, but a jumping-off point to talk about something else, where the film leads you *to* rather than the film itself. But I do think there is something wrong about the fact that I can talk about things I don't like better than about the things I do like. I just told you about this film, *The Headless Woman*, I am really not being very articulate. There is another film I saw this week, *Violence at Noon*, an Oshima film that I got very excited by, and yet if you ask me to describe it to you I would fail completely. I would just say go see it.

NH: I kind of had at one point convinced myself that I couldn't write a thesis about films that I liked –

JL: But you managed quiet well –

Nasrin laughs.

JL: What about a thesis on films you hate?

NH: Well, that's easy.

JL: It is much easier.

NH: And that was something I was also struggling with in terms of methodology. To make the experience matter for myself I didn't want to do an analysis, and I didn't want to follow a film studies methodology that is already pre-determined in terms of structure and method of how to write about films –

JL: And then again you're using the films as a kind of jumping-off point to talk about something else which is what you were interested in.

NH: Exactly. And I should just make films. Why am I writing about them?

JL: I don't think it's either-or.

NH: Yeah. It's not all or nothing [laughs].

JL: All those trite clichés.