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SIMON ELLIS

DROPPING THE KNIVES AND LIFTING THE HOODIE

Simon Ellis would just like to make it clear: he's not just the 'anti-knife crime guy'. Just because he's made two anti-knife crime films for the London Metropolitan Police that have won so many awards he could build them their own trophy cabinet, he wants to point out he's not merely the go-to guy for convincing portrayals of tough-looking youths on Britain's mean streets.

OK, he also made *Soft*, a white-knuckle ride of a short film, about hoodies terrorising a man and his son in their own home, which is so powerful and resonant it can turn *Guardian*-reading Buddhists into baseball bat-wielding urban vigilantes. But in fact, he's actually directed all kinds of films: TV, comedy shorts, experimental works, music videos, a feature - the memorably-titled *Dogging: A Love Story* - and even a couple of non-knife crime ads too. Some of these have also won awards: his most recent short film, *Jam Today*, for example, a gentle tale of pre-teen love and sexual awakening, swept up honours at a number of film festivals last year.

Indeed he says that he consciously chose different genres of film expressly to avoid being pigeonholed. "At one point it was going around that 'Simon's very good at comedies and he's winning awards, but can he do drama?'" he recalls. "I really resented that comment. So I did *Soft*."

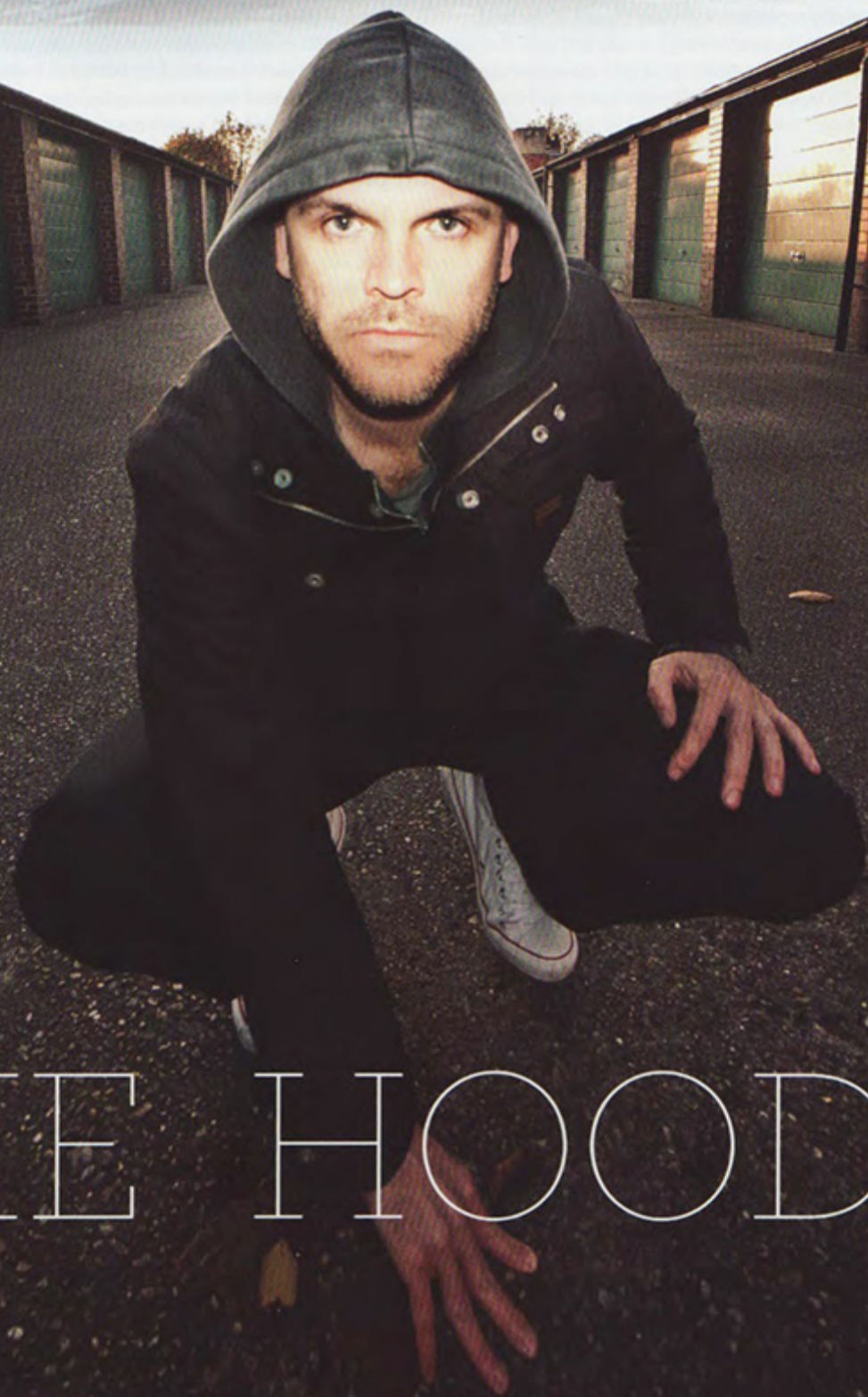
But the fact remains that, at the moment, Ellis's commercial directing profile has him down as 'the anti-knife-crime guy', and that's due to his work on two innovative campaigns for the Met Police - *Choose A Different Ending* and *Who Killed Deon?*. These films have been reeling in awards by the bucketload: in 2010 *Choose...* won two golds and the inaugural Grand Prix for Good at Cannes Lions, platinum and two golds at the Creative Circle awards, gold at the BTAA Arrows, and much more, in categories spanning from public health and safety to best viral campaign.

And in 2011, *Who Killed Deon?* won gold at the Clios, silvers at Cannes Lions, Creative Circle awards, BTAA Arrows and Kinsale Sharks, and most recently, a Grand Prix and gold at the BIMAs, plus two gold and a silver at the LIAs.

Devised out of AMV BBDO primarily by creatives Martin Loraine and Steve Jones, both campaigns are innovative, specifically designed to engage a youthful target audience. In *Choose...*, that was 13-15-year-old boys in London. Filmed from the point of view of a teenage boy from a London sink estate, through a series of 21 mini-films on YouTube it allowed viewers to decide what happens next - with ten different possible endings. The campaign showed young viewers that any trail of events following the teen's decision to carry a knife had a very bad outcome - even fatal. Its successor *Who Killed Deon?* was tasked to educate young London teens on the consequences of the Joint Enterprise law, where any involvement in a serious crime can mean being charged with the same crime as the main perpetrator. This time, □

At various points in his career, Simon Ellis has felt like a holed-up pigeon, stereotyped as a director of either comedies or street crime films. But, as his many awards testify, he can flex his filmmaking muscles in a variety of genres. *David Knight* meets the 'not the anti-knife crime guy'

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the same story is told from the perspectives of six characters with a different connection to Deon's murder – six films were made and initially distributed on DVD in London by street teams, before an edit of the film featuring all six stories simultaneously was shown at London cinemas last year.

Their effectiveness is down to Ellis's adept handling of two complicated and sensitive briefs. His achievement is quite evident on one level, but also subtle – even invisible – on another: he has created films with grittily credible scenarios and characters, that also manage to stay within the tight guidelines set by the client, the advertising regulators and even the law of the land.

"After *Soft*, I was offered a lot of things involving hoodies and kids. But this was a really interesting idea, the whole 'choose your own adventure' aspect to it. It was something that I'd toyed with myself years before, and I realised they'd really thought it through."

### Film festival fanatic

But it was a case of negotiating a minefield of rules and regulations – including having a large cast without a single criminal conviction between them. "You have to be careful what you do. You have to do a realistic portrayal, but you have to do that without swearing, spitting, blood, tattoos – and still try to keep some kind of authenticity about it. That was the real challenge."

But Simon Ellis is a very resourceful filmmaker who had embraced a DIY ethic even before digital technology made that option straightforward. Most importantly, he is an actor's director, and his ability to draw out convincing performances, often from inexperienced young actors and non-professionals, makes his films powerful, whatever the genre. That includes non-fiction subjects, demonstrated with his ads for the TDA showing real teachers at work, in his other big public service advertising campaign in 2010.

In fact Ellis comes out of a strong tradition of regional British filmmaking. Hailing from Nottingham, Ellis gravitated towards Intermedia, the city's late, lamented film arts centre, after he graduated from university in the late 90s. A vibrant, can-do filmmaking culture prevailed there – one that nurtured director Shane Meadows, who was moving on to bigger things at the same time that Simon arrived on the scene. "You could go to Intermedia and do volunteer work, from rigging edit suites to answering phones, and they would pay you back in kind with the loan of a camera or a day's editing. There were a lot of people who were directing, acting, doing sound and music. You could always crew something up for nothing. So I started writing scripts."

Not surprisingly, this fine art graduate, specialising in photography, was initially "a film snob." But his first attempt at a short film, painstakingly created on Super 8 prompted a rethink. "It was totally incoherent, so as an antithesis, I shot this thing on Hi8 and edited it on beta, and it won an award at the BBC British Short Film Festival." That was *Thicker Than Water*, a sharply written single-take tale of sibling oneupmanship – with Simon himself playing identical twins. "*Thicker* was very basic filmmaking. I wanted to do everything myself – starring, editing – to see what would happen." The result was that he went on to write and direct a succession of short films – some funded, some not – in a variety of styles, from experimental visuals such as *Thousand*, to edgy comedy drama like *Square One* and *The Fiver Thing* – and always shooting on video. "I made a decision to make as many films as I could, rather than working through the ranks," he explains. "I knew that would provide little or no income, but it would hone my directing in a way that the other route couldn't." He also started submitting everything to film festivals, and once accepted, attended them whenever possible. After *Thicker Than Water*, he realised the importance of film festivals as a form of exposure, and a means to fund future projects. He's also described film festivals as "my film school" – and not just for social or career-enhancing reasons. "I realised that

as soon as you're among the audience watching your film, you really learn so much – not by people saying things, or whether they clap or not, but you just know from being in the room, if something's too slow, or too fast, or whatever."

The next big success came in 2001 with *Telling Lies* – a series of phone conversations visualised entirely in word captions that tell what the characters are thinking rather than saying – which won awards at festivals from Hamburg to Toronto. It was followed by *What About The Bodies* in 2002, a nightmarish black comedy horror set in the Lake District, which also scooped up several film fest prizes around the globe. That was made for the UK Film Council's Digital Shorts scheme, and by then Simon was traveling upon a well-recognised path towards a first feature as a writer/director. He was also starting to write a feature screenplay, that would then become the basis for *Soft*, when he realised he had the chance to get funding from the scheme Cinema Extreme – also regarded as a bridge between shorts and features. "*Soft* was also a very condensed version of the feature I was writing. It was the first time I had a budget to play with, the first time I stepped back and didn't actually shoot it myself, and for the first time I gave myself the head space to deal with what was important. To really concentrate on the actors and story."

Set in suburban Nottingham, *Soft* focusses on a father's failure to stand up to a group of feral yobs who have already bullied and attacked his son – in particular, their nasty but charismatic leader. It is essentially about the primal instincts of fear and courage, and its plausibility has struck a chord with audiences wherever its played. Among its many prizes it won Best International Short at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008, best short at the British Independent Film Awards, and was nominated for a BAFTA.

### Dogging: A long story in the editing suite

So is *Soft* based on personal experience or observation? "A bit of both, I'm just really interested in the idea, the crisis of masculinity and male pride," he says. "A father may not be in that environment of being kicked around in the playground, but it doesn't mean the fear has gone. And what happens if you dropkick back into that, and you're not being a tower of strength? I'm still trying to write the feature film now, after almost ten years. I think there's a lot more mileage to get out of it."

Unfortunately *Soft's* success was overshadowed by Ellis's experience making his debut feature film, which started straight after completing the short. The title of *Dogging: A Love Story* is actually a fair reflection of the content. It's a romcom, but set in a milieu of dank car parks, where people have sex while others watch. "I just found the whole oxymoronic nature of the title really fascinating," he says. "I also thought that it was ostensibly a romantic comedy and I usually hate them, so it'd be a real challenge." But after a successful shoot, it started to go horribly wrong in the editing suite, when the director's hands-on instincts got the better of his judgement to leave it to a fresh pair of eyes, and he started cutting it himself. He ended up in the edit suite for months trying to reconcile *Dogging's* differing tones, without notable success. "*Soft* winning Sundance opened up a huge amount of doors, none of which I really followed up because I was consumed with editing *Dogging*. Sadly, I didn't attend the festival to claim the prize personally. If I had, things might have been very different."

The silver lining is that Ellis was available to make *Choose A Different Ending* – his first commercial – in the summer of 2009. Despite the dangers of pigeonholing, it has introduced him into a whole new area of filmmaking, and was followed by his TDA ads last year, which encourage teacher traineeships in maths and science. "I'm passionate about the importance of good teaching, and I got to meet some really great teachers from all corners of the country," he says. "When it came to the shoot I insisted that they'd be teaching their

"You have to do a realistic portrayal, but you have to do that without swearing, spitting, blood, tattoos."

own genuine classes in their own classrooms – teaching a bespoke lesson, which we'd arranged between us." Then came *Who Killed Deon?*, which he describes as "the hardest shoot I've done in my life." Apart from filming mostly in a sweaty, smoky club, and putting together six separate films, he says the complex nature of the message – that many people can be charged in a murder – meant they had to reshoot various scenes. "I wanted to make sure there was as much crossing over between characters as possible. When you watch the six films separately, in the Facebook campaign, you can lose that, so the cinema version, with the six screens together, has made it really worthwhile. I don't mind admitting that what's most effective about it was a happy accident – the confusion when the stabbing happens. You don't quite know where to look, or what's going on." Though the awards keep rolling in for *Who Killed Deon?*, Ellis currently remains something of an outsider in the

world of commercials. But that's probably because he's absorbed in another project. He's currently making films with the band Swimming – working on capturing the phenomenon of 'binaural' recording; and also the beatbox artist known as Petebox – the subject of probably his biggest viral hit. Petebox's version of The Pixies *Where Is My Mind*, filmed in Simon's kitchen, has had a million views on YouTube. Now he's filming all the tracks from Petebox's new album – as they are being recorded.

And there will always be short films – he just loves making them. "Short film is a format of its own and while you obviously learn the technical elements of film craft, it is a different beast. When I first started out I prefer features but the more I became embroiled in the short film circuit my preference switched quite massively."

Simon Ellis – coming to a film festival near you. [S]

"I just found the whole oxymoronic nature of [Dogging: A Love Story] really fascinating. I also thought that it was ostensibly a romantic comedy and I usually hate them, so it'd be a real challenge."



1/2 Short Film *Soft*

3/4 Jam Today

3 London Metropolitan Police, *Choose a Different Ending*



### Simon Ellis

#### Representation

TV commercials [madcowfilms.co.uk](http://madcowfilms.co.uk)

#### Key work

- *10 Again* (2002)
- *Soft* (2007)
- *Dogging: A Love Story* (2009)
- Metropolitan Police *Choose A Different Ending* (2009); *Who Killed Deon?* (2011)