

# Osbert Parker

Filmmaker, Director, Animator



*Film Noir* (2005)

*Three times BAFTA nominated and award winning Osbert Parker, is perhaps best known for creating stories that use experimental and innovative film techniques. They often combine photo cut-out animation with objects and live action to create one-of-a-kind imaginary landscapes in mixed media short films, commercials, TV entertainment and online content. 'FILM NOIR' was nominated for best short animated film by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) and won a Palme d'Or nomination at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006. 'YOURS TRULY' aka 'HEAD OVER HEELS, best short animated film winner at the British Animation Awards, was also nominated for a BAFTA in 2008 and selected for Sundance.*

Interview 02/03/21 OP=Osbert Parker, CW=Charlotte Waelde, GR=Graham Rawle

**GR** *Is pastiche how you would ever describe your work?*

**OP** No. I think there is a negative association with the word pastiche. I think it suggests the imitation of something. Why imitate when you can create something original? I always describe my work as mixed media collage, though of course lots of it is pastiche. I am imitating classic 1940s era style of film noir. I am imitating genre but it's not just the genre; as an artist, I am trying to recontextualise it in a modern way for today. I'm using objects, some of which were around at that time, and I'm taking things out of context. I'm creating something in a fresh way that's playful to myself.

**GR** *I notice that on your Vimeo page where we get to see tasty little snippets of your films, one of the comments from a viewer is, 'I wish I could see the whole film, is it available for sale?' and your response is 'unfortunately not, because of Copyright issues'. What are those copyright issues?*

**OP** For me, it's when it goes public. I think you can do whatever you want to. People can take a picture off the Internet, sound sampling, visual sampling if it's for personal private use. When you're doing these personal private expressions you can create really interesting things, feeling unrestricted. You're not thinking about budget, you're not thinking about time and you're definitely not thinking about the law. You are finding a way to be playful and experimental. Then when it ends up as a film, people are responding to it. I think, 'Well this should be shown to the public.' Then I start to think about the law. Only after I've committed the crime. Ah, okay. Will I be caught? It's not a crime until I'm caught. Have I broken the law? I don't know. It looks really good, let's release it to some festivals. We showed it at festivals where they are like-minded artists, they appreciate the film... And then I get a tap on my shoulder. It was at Telluride or Sundance, one of the quite big festivals where the studios go, and they said, 'Yes, we've heard about this film, we've seen it.' And it is was Warner Brothers. They said, 'We really like it, but we don't want you to be selling it anywhere; we don't want you to be making money out of our footage.' I didn't think it was illegal when I was doing it, and I would still do similar things now. I think if Warner Brothers say they don't want to see anyone making money, profiting from their rights, I would adhere to that.

**CW** *But it's not in any way undercutting their market, is it? You bring together all the bits and put them together including excerpts/extracts from Warner Brothers works, and you make them available. Even if you sold your film, or you sold access to it, or you licenced it, that wouldn't make any difference to Warner Brothers' market.*

**OP** I don't see them making those films; they are very much a niche. There is a market for it, there's a real appetite for it, but it's not an area in which I see Warner Brothers occupying that space. It was something that was said: 'We don't want to see you making money out of it,' – like I'm taking money from them. Every film I play, just before I'm about to photograph it, it's always up there, the copyright law. And I often think, 'Wow, wouldn't that be a nightmare to be thrown into jail with murderers and rapists and all I've done is just a little bit of collage. What an awful thing to happen.'

Only when that film is beginning to generate an interest in its finished form and people are saying, 'This is really great, can we show it on TV and can Canal Plus show it? Can we buy it and then sell it on a DVD? We say, 'Yes we'd love to do that.' They send me over a contract. In that contract it says, do you have the rights to the picture and the sound? When I go to sign it, I think, 'Oh, do I? I made the film, it's mine. This is a piece of art, it's my work of art. Yes, I own it. You can licence it.' And then I go, 'Hang on a minute, do I really own this little piece? Do I own that Orson Welles bit, that bit of Hitchcock? Can I sign this?' That's when I start to think about those copyright issues and then I begin to self-restrict, after I've made the work of art, and after I've shown it. That is when I start to restrict myself for copyright reasons, not knowing the law. I think I prefer not to know. I just prefer to do it, get it out there. If I'm starting to hear, well actually you've got to do this, or go through that loophole – that's like having a cold shower and I don't want to start to block my creative process, I'd rather just do it.

I just finished an MTV commercial, one of these 20-second stings and it's supposed to be released in Black History Month. It used all these iconic black figures, past and present and MTV paid for all of the rights of the photographs because I wanted to animate them. Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman - loads of historic images and also modern artists, images of Beyoncé, Pharrell

Williams and they had to get the OK, I guess from whoever owns photographs. So, it was quite the opposite, as they had to get things cleared before the film could be finished off. When I'm working, I will definitely take from different places, and the legality doesn't restrict, mustn't restrict actually, the creative process. But when I'm working for a client, they are paying me. They have to clear all these images before I can put them in the film. There are other restrictions when you make a live action short or a live action feature, just different kinds of restrictions. You're always relying on a distributor of some kind, whether it's an art distributor or a studio.

**GR** *In the films that you make, it seems important that the elements that you're using, the borrowed found footage clips, often need to be 'visible' in order to make your point.*

**OP** I think it needs to because the artist has this conversation with the concept, with the story, and how the audience engages with the characters that experience the story. I've just been talking to 20-somethings and they don't really know this film genre, they don't really know Humphrey Bogart or Ingrid Bergman. So that context of relating to the films, and that joy of identifying films, it wasn't there. But they watched it on a different level, and they enjoyed the film a lot. They knew they were old films that maybe their parents or even their grandparents had watched, but that level engagement wasn't there in the film. For me, like you, it was actually important to have certain actors from clips in the film because it enhances it. When I showed the film in the States specifically, which is why I like to watch with in the audience, people really know some of these films and it allows the experience to be so much greater than just watching another piece of collage film.

The issue came up when I made *Yours Truly*, it was commissioned by Animate and Channel 4. When I made the original version of that it had random people in it, which didn't have the weight, it didn't have the context to it. I had other images I wanted to use, but they had to get approval, so I just made my version. There are actually two versions: there's *Head over Heels*, which is a 5-minute cut, and there's my version too.



*Yours Truly* (2006)

It brings me back to that word pastiche again. I think for me yes, it can have a negative connotation... I don't think it is negative, but it can have a negative context where it is just a copy, an imitation of something. But I think if you're making a comment on it, like in a parody, I don't

think it is just pastiche. You're bringing something new to the table and you'll put it into a different context. I think it is pastiche, you've got to acknowledge that, but it can be more, it can be something else. You're creating something original by using these elements of pastiche.

**GR** *That's how I've always thought about pastiche. It's a watered down or lesser copy of something great. You're riding on the creative coattails of somebody else. I can see how you and I both choose certain found elements that need to retain their original characteristics in order to be transformed into something new. So, in that sense I can see our work being described as pastiche - although I would never use the word pastiche.*

**CW** *Can you give me an example of an artwork that you would call a bad pastiche?*

**OP** I think for me that example would be a copy or an imitation of a Cezanne or a Van Gogh painting. It's in the style of a Van Gogh, they're trying to imitate it, trying to be like it, but it isn't quite like it.

**GR** *The suggestion is that the integrity is not there in the in the pastiche process - that it lacks the original Van Gogh intention. The new work is not clever enough, inventive enough, it's not saying anything new. I think for a good pastiche you need to understand the characteristics of the material well and you need to have a certain respect for it, even if you're making a parody, you should respect the integrity of the original.*

**OP** If it's not making me think differently about the work, it's not making me see something fresh about it, for me it's just bad, because it's not achieving anything new. It's this bad imitation, and if it's a bad imitation I think I would prefer to look at the original.

**GR** *I think it's that word pastiche. It's perhaps ill-chosen by copyright law as a way of describing the kind of work that we do. I can sort of see it, but it's a word that seems to be loaded with the idea of imitation and lack of originality.*

**OP** I was watching *The Clock* [Christian Marclay] a couple of years ago at the Tate Modern with a filmmaker friend of mine and we were sat there just in complete awe of it. And he saw his clock, it was his shot from his film on the screen. He said, 'Well, he never asked me to use it.' So, going back to Charlotte's question - would you want someone to do that with your work? He [Marclay] had used his work and he wasn't asked permission. But it's such a tiny fragment in this lovely 'dish' that was made.

**CW** *Have you ever thought about getting insurance?*

**OP** No. When I'm working as an artist, I never think about the legality of the of the work I'm making, but I think it's a good idea. When you're constructing a piece of work on a timeline, you are using elements a bit like cooking. You are using these ingredients, which may well be in the archive like Warner Brothers or different studios or even found at the market, and you're adding them and you're cooking it up and then it ends up on the timeline which tastes completely different; yes, you can taste the rosemary and you can taste the mint in it, absolutely, because that is part of this curry or whatever dish you're cooking, but that dish is new. It's a completely fresh dish. I have no fear in arguing that; I only fear how much it would cost if I had to argue that in court. Because it costs money to be able to do that. But I definitely feel as if I'm taking these little elements, absolutely pastiche, and making something fresh from it.