

The Scar Audio Commentary Transcript Film 3 – The Gossip

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Noor Afshan Mirza: My name is Noor Afshan.

00:02

Brad Butler: My name's Brad. And we're watching film three of The Scar, the three-screen version.

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Noor Afshan Mirza: This part of the trilogy is called The Gossip. The Gossip focuses on a transnational group of activists, a group of

women who are aware of each other in terms of being aware of each other's struggles.

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They're all women that have been either elected by their community to represent their community, or they're coming together. Gossip used to be a term of friendship and community, so it goes right back to the time of the witch trials, where the term gossip migrated from being affirmative and positive to being negative.

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I would probably be part of a gossip, and I'd have knowledge around certain things which could be to do with plants or things that you share and distribution of labour and care and work, but around the time when poor women, the women who stood up against the landlord...

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...were being taken out of their communities and identified as witches. That's a deep history, being pulled out of your community, identified as a witch, tortured to then give up other women's names, to give up other women in your gossip. So that's where the term gossip migrated from one of community, friendship, social bonds, cooperative, cooperating with each other, to this negative term of women's talk, tittle-tattle, you know.

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And it still to this day remains a negative term. So, I've been interested in not just the holding of space, of organising women's space, of inclusive spaces of which all women can come together to share and build across different experiences in

the struggle to live in the kind of world that you want to live in...

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...and the changes that you'd like to see happen. In the third film we've got three narrative strands, because we've got the post-crash, so there's still the story of the men, and their relationship to whether they can, want to or will exist in this new space, this new society. You've got the women from *The Gossip*, who have already been agent and the threads and the seeds of their connection to Yenge and her consciousness started in film two.

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So now they are totally taking the space, organising the space. And then you've got *The Resistant Dead*, so you've got those

performances of their individual stories. We worked with individual characters that are based on real events.

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I don't know how to describe it. It's like telling a story through your body. So, we're looking now at the scene where we've got The Gossip on the right screen, which I think you say stage right. We've got the centre screen which has got Leona, and then stage left we have a scene from...

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...a shadow space, but it's not like a liminal space, it's not like purgatory. We didn't want to ever think that the men were on trial. We didn't want to have that kind of conversation, but we still needed to find a space.

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Brad Butler: That's an interesting problem we faced, because of course we were really asking ourselves to question that if the car is the state of the state, how do we get out of the car? And that's an interesting problem for those male protagonists - not to dwell on them too much - because the third film isn't really about them.

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But where are they? What happens to these characters when you remove the structure that they understand? How do they cope, how do they not cope? We took the decision quite early that they wouldn't speak, and they don't in the third film. Even speech itself is interesting in film three, because for a long time we thought about using our local and international networks to

bring together people who were non-actors to be in *The Gossip*, but it got really interesting and deep to think about international solidarity networks and their relationship to language.

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And we did not want to suddenly catapult ourselves into all speaking the same language together, which is often English. Not always, but often. And so handling a politics of listening where the women could understand each other across different languages, moved us into an area of working with a script and with actors - albeit actors who had an empathy with the political ideas of the project.

06:13

Noor Afshan Mirza: That's a conversation that I've brought to the project. I've been involved in

a lot of spaces, and over time I found myself in spaces that have been mixed. It can be any sort of meeting - maybe around what's happening to the cuts regarding housing in your local community?

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And I found myself in a lot of these spaces that have started off as mixed, as in there have both been men and women and boys and girls, but then over time it's just become a women's space, because it's the drudgery, or the day-to-day, or the maintaining, or whatever. I haven't super analysed it, but there are a lot of spaces I found myself in that have become just women.

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And of course, that has changed and influenced me in ways to the value around what it is to

work in an intersectional way in terms of struggle, but also to work in spaces where this is a women's space. With that we've got class, you've got race, you've got sexuality, all these things.

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It is already an incredibly complex space of being and belonging and organising. I wanted to go back to the conversation around working and devising from social spaces, or from experience of organising in daily life, to writing fiction. We knew right from the beginning that *The Gossip* was going to be its own integral part.

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In a sense, the three-screen was situated in the gallery in the final chapter of the film. We always wanted to be present in where we arrived at, if

you know what I mean, at the end. But it's so compelling and difficult to get to that point. In the writing of the dialogue, a lot of this is written, but also when we cast, we worked with actors, some of whom wrote and really made their parts.

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I very much feel that when I watch *The Gossip*, I don't feel like it's written. I don't feel like it's scripted. I feel like it is much more that I am present in this, round this fire, with these women, and I feel that kind of intimacy. But that process is something that could have been extended in terms of time. We only had two days together with *The Gossip* women to rehearse and write into.

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And then we had a very short space of time when we arrived in the woods and our idea of how we were going to shoot it just went completely out the window. We had this great idea, and then the realisation that 'oh my god, this is just not going to work'. We were working with an amazing female director of photography, but it was our last night on the shoot, and it was her first night.

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We'd never worked together, so it was like bringing someone in new to an atmosphere. Even just getting the permission to have the fire in the woods - we dug a fire pit - and finding the location, all these things sound really simple, but it took so much time and labour to make it feel really natural.

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So, to feel comfortable and natural and let the conversation flow, because you can imagine the conversation can go in so many directions, and we wanted to have enough in there, which is more like trigger points. It's not a big thesis around contemporary feminist discussions, it's too broad a topic around all that in relationship to the present, recent history and long-term history. You can't do that in 25 minutes with three screens.

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So, it's building a conversation that is going across these threads, and how the performances speak to *The Gossip*, and *The Gossip* speak to *The Resistant Dead*. And then also where the story of the state of the state and the male protagonists' relationship to whether they can shift and accommodate - whether they can see

themselves and place themselves in this new society, this new space.

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Brad Butler: We don't have an answer to this straightaway, but I think there's a different editing structure from film three to films one and two. And we still need to solve what that might mean for the whole thing as a single screen, which we want to do, but there's a different editing structure, and I don't just mean across the three screens, because that's a kind of montage.

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It's to do with how long you sit with someone speaking and turning over ideas in a present tense way. It's to do with a different kind of listening frequency that's needed for the third

film. Films one and two don't work like that. They overlap and loop on each other to build a series of psychological spaces, a series of rooms that you escape from and then find yourself back in - sometimes the same room, sometimes a slightly different one, or something's different and you don't know what it is.

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And film three doesn't quite operate like that. It tries to sit you round as if you're inside this safe-ish space, though the space is clearly under threat from outside forces. But the women are holding a space, and you're invited to be in it, and at the same time you have these performances which punch through, which seem to have their own related structure and systems, their own way of speaking and being...

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...which you might or might not be able to catch and fully embody in yourself. And then this shadow space, which I think sits in this gap between those two, between the fire and the women. Between what Yenge's thinking, how she's processing her memories, or how she's processing the feeling of those men still around her body but disappearing from her. Or if you want to come at it from the position of the men, how the men can feel their way towards this fire or not, as it happens in the film.

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So, all of those are happening. At the same time, you're dealing with the oldest form of cinema, which is people telling each other stories.

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Noor Afshan Mirza: Round a fire. There's the cinema, the Plato's cave thing, the shadows, the light, telling stories. Also, when we hear Yenge speak, it's important that this space is a horizontal space. It's interesting when I was just listening to Brad, because I was thinking so much about our work is about voice.

14:20

The way that the characters are speaking or listening or talking over each other in films one and two, or being silenced, or silencing - it's completely different in film three. So, there is this horizontal space. There is this space where there's power around that circle. There's lots of power, but the power is moving and speaking and articulating in a very different way.

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That's where I think the politics of listening comes in, it's like tuning. We must tune ourselves into that. In a way, I think I'm only now just starting to experience what it feels like in the gallery, so it's hard to even talk about it, but just in terms of the ideas, like having these circles.

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Enclosures really, so you're in headphones for film one and two, but I think the space does feel safe. It feels safe to have quite an adventurous journey, which is where your mind goes. Because with cinema you can go in so many different directions, even if you're being given a very clear narrative. It's still your story that you build as a viewer.

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And for the third film, it's so much more expansive in terms of scale and presence. But also, the flow is actually... I don't like to use the word 'simple', but there's a difference, the feeling that time is moving differently.

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Brad Butler: That's what I mean, I think you need more patience in the third film, as a viewer. It remains to be seen how that works, because I've never made a film where you change editing strategy on people two-thirds of the way through.

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Noor Afshan Mirza: Or change editing strategy on all of us. We're also viewers as well, and this is our first feature film, but it's a feature film that is in a gallery, over five screens. So, the whole

notion of how time is working and stitched is fragmented and looped.

17:00

I suppose what I'm trying to say is it's actually quite simple. It's a simple story. It's an age-old story, sadly. It's a story that's written in every part of society, it's not specific to one people or one culture. On one level it's really, really simple, but the complexity really comes when you spend time and maybe your heartbeat goes a little.

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It's like free diving, you've got to slow your heart down a bit, or slow your blood pressure. And then you keep going deeper and deeper, and the pressure builds up, and you're like, oh yeah, I'm in something which is quite complex.

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Can you tell a feature film story over five screens? Can we hold ourselves as viewers in that? And the big question - it's a massive ask for people. Asking for people to give up 57 minutes of their time to go on the journey that we've gone on. We've gone on it over two years, but this is two years into 57 minutes, five screens. Because time is also the thing that we have the least of.

18:29

Brad Butler: We're coming to the end of the film now, and I'm saying that because I think it was always an interesting question for us - how to end this film. And it's one of the few things that I feel changed. I don't know how you feel about this - I feel like the ending, the real image that is

inscribed at the end of the two women standing together, and looking out through their space into our space, that was always there, but allowing the narrative of *The Gossip* to drift away and disappear, that wasn't quite written like that.

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And it was something to think about, whether we wanted to make a final statement or whether we wanted to end with an image. In the end, we allow it to loop back on itself, so it became a film three that didn't seek to answer itself, rather it wanted to set you the question. If you were around the fire, what would you be able to take away with you? How would you speak? What would your story be? What would your structure be?

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Who would your solidarity networks be with?
How might it relate to these amazing performances? You have these two performers in this end shot – Anna is on the right-hand side in the red dress. She has been a long-term collaborator of ours, it's been an amazing collaboration, and she was the person helping us direct the performances through these films.

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Noor Afshan Mirza: The three of us co-directed. That's the other thing - we're sitting here talking, but there's a lot of voices. Brad and I have been in a collaborative conversation and making conversation for a long time, but there's so much to say about collaboration in this work, and how we've all worked.

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When you first encounter each other, you have this relationship of artist and actor through casting, and then we had a concept and then Anna was brilliant at being able to articulate, so we started to work together. Those are the works we're going to show later in the month in March, so that's Deep State and Hold Your Ground, and Everything for Everyone and Nothing for Us.

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So we produced something collectively all together, collaboratively, that neither one of us would do on our own. That's an obvious thing to say, but it was such a rich experience and has fed all three of us individually, and as we've continued working we've shifted those relationships. For this project, Anna was co-director, performer, deviser and I think the three of us are definitely going to work more.

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We want to take The Resistant Dead as a thematic and take the works further in the next year or so, because we've just planted seeds in this film. Not only in the content but also how we work together.

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