

DAVE MCKEAN SHORT FILMS

20 FILMS ON BLU-RAY, WITH A 48 PAGE BOOK OF POSTERS AND RELATED IMAGES



Hourglass
presents
A short film *In seven days*
BY *DAVE M'KEAN*

with
DEAN HARRIS
EAMONN COLLINGE

The Week Before

featuring the music of
Django
Reinhardt

Director of Photography
ANTONY SHEARN
Edited and programmed by
MAX McMULLIN
Produced by
SIMON MOORHEAD
Written, designed and directed by
DAVE MCKEAN
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THE WEEK BEFORE

Colour - 23 mins. - 1998

Dean Harris - God

Eamonn Collinge - The Devil

Music composed by Dave McKean

Arranged by Dave McKean and Ashley Slater

Music produced by Ashley Slater

Filippo Dall'Asta - Guitar

Duncan Menzies - Violin

Dave McKean - Piano

Ashley Slater - Trombone and trumpet

Director of photography - Antony Shearn

CG animation and programming - Max McMullin

Produced by Simon Moorhead

Written, edited, designed, and directed by Dave McKean

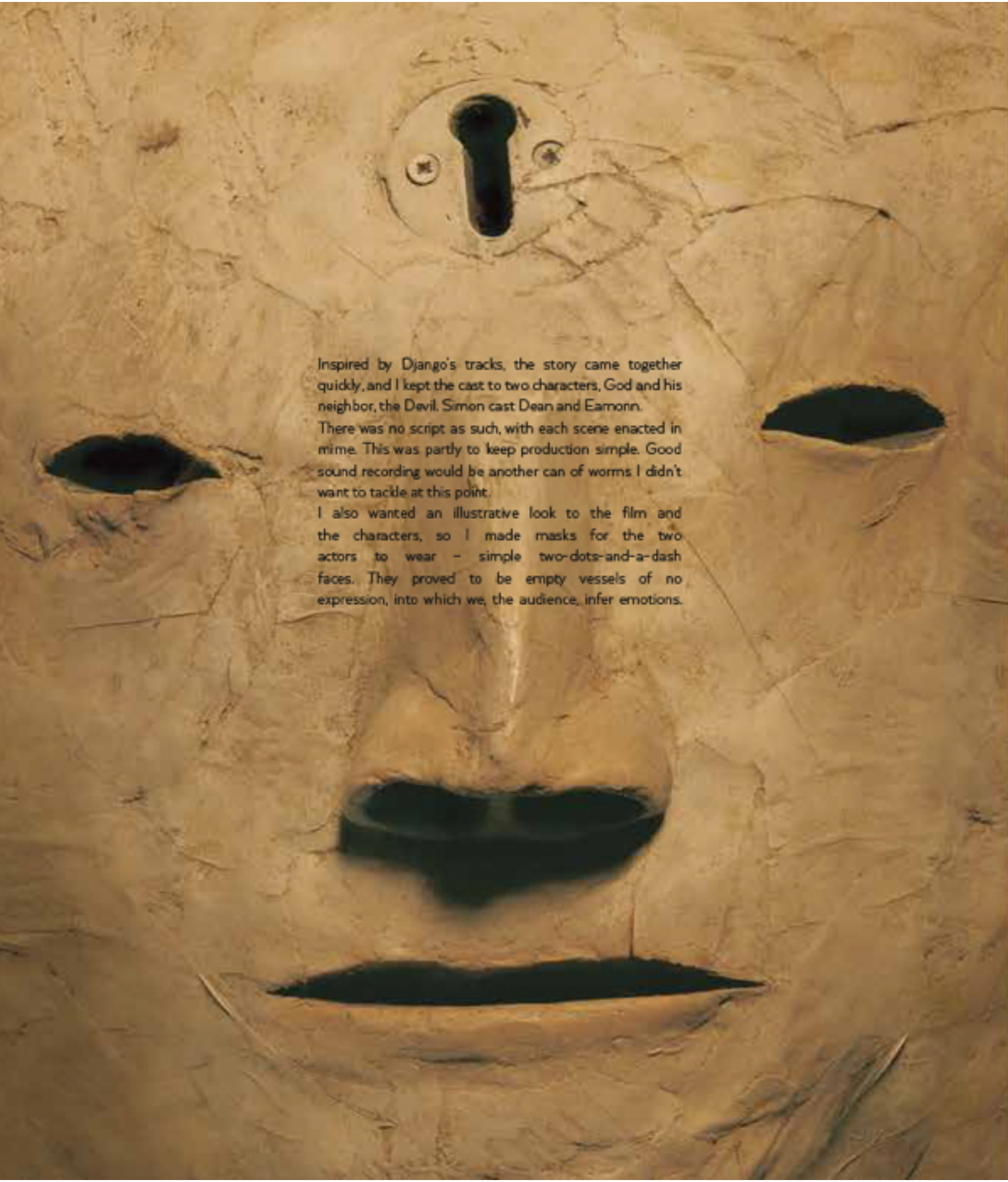
By the time I started thinking about making a film, I'd spent ten years making illustrations, comics, photographs, and designs for a variety of projects, and I really missed music.

Art and music were the most important things in my life and I'd really neglected the latter. I was keen to try and make a film so I could create a sound world as well as a visual world, and I wanted to try and find a film equivalent of my still images.

For some reason, I can't remember why, I started imagining little comedic sequences while listening to the evocative recordings of Django Reinhardt.

Simon Moorhead was keen to produce. He'd had experience as a line producer and location manager for TV, including the seminal *Threads*. He brought in cinematographer Antony Shearn. I had done a little work with Max McMullin, who had moved from being a painter to an animator.


A film with such a small crew and no budget needed a manageable story idea, so I thought it should be about God creating everything in the universe. But rather than being the ACTUAL week in which he was supposed to have achieved this feat, it's the week before that one. The week where he showed up on Monday morning with the best intentions of creating the universe, but couldn't think of anything. It was, in essence, about the act of creativity. About staring at that blank piece of paper, trying to find a starting point, and the various prevarications that get in the way.



Inspired by Django's tracks, the story came together quickly, and I kept the cast to two characters, God and his neighbor, the Devil. Simon cast Dean and Eamonn.

There was no script as such, with each scene enacted in mime. This was partly to keep production simple. Good sound recording would be another can of worms I didn't want to tackle at this point.

I also wanted an illustrative look to the film and the characters, so I made masks for the two actors to wear - simple two-dots-and-a-dash faces. They proved to be empty vessels of no expression, into which we, the audience, infer emotions.

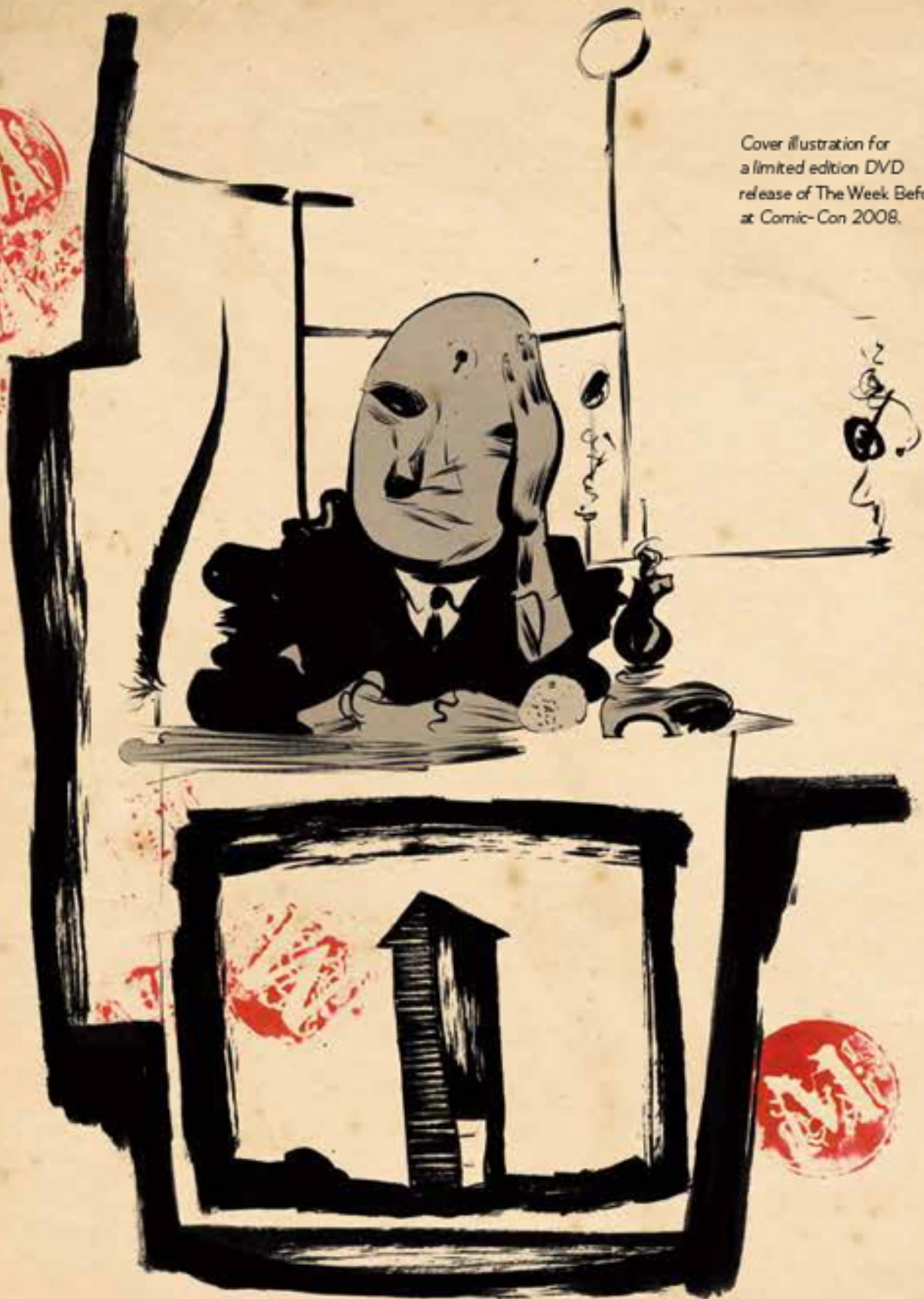


This proved to me the power of masks. In a way they are removing the most powerful indicator that we use to read a person's feelings - their face. But, strangely, they actually force us to pay much closer attention to everything else: body language, light and shade, atmosphere, the subtlety of action, and in this film, the relationship of the action to the music.

We shot for two days and had a wonderful time, mostly. I don't think Simon had such a good time freezing to death in the pond keeping the rowboat in one place.

The rushes were a mixed bag. There were some problems, so we reconvened almost exactly a year later and shot the remainder of the material needed to finish the film.

Cover illustration for
a limited edition DVD
release of *The Week Before*
at Comic-Con 2008.





Max created some simple but effective CG candles and planets, I got used to After Effects, which is essentially moving Photoshop, and the film was completed with a sound mix at the now defunct VideoLondon, the only part of the process I really wanted to get finished professionally.

The music was an issue. It was so embedded into every part of the film, from its initial inspiration to the final effect, I couldn't imagine losing it. I contacted EMI via a friend at Virgin Records in London, and their opinion was, if it's a portfolio piece, not for profit, that's fine. If you start selling it, come back to us.

The film played at festivals all over the world, and was included as part of a touring digital film festival in America. Eventually I wanted to try and release a set of my short films on DVD, and hired someone to clear all the music I had used. All the other films were fine, but for some reason never given, the Django Reinhardt estate refused to license the recordings and the whole project collapsed.

That was over ten years ago. Since then, I've created several soundtracks with producer and arranger Ashley Slater in all manner of styles. It seemed that the only solution was to create a whole new soundtrack in the style of Django. Crazy really, but the result is now in the film. I miss the originals of course, but I'm hugely grateful to Filippo and Duncan for getting into the Hot Club spirit.

HOURLASS
PRESENTS
A FILM BY
DAVE MCKEAN
—
EAMONN COLLINGE
EILLEN DÁLY
NARRATED BY JOHN CALE

n [e] n

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
ANTONY SHEARN
MUSIC BY THE RACHELS,
DAVE MCKEAN AND IAIN BALLANTYNE
EDITING AND PROGRAMMING
MAX McMULLIN
PRODUCED BY
SIMON MOORHEAD
WRITTEN, DESIGNED, AND
DIRECTED BY
DAVE MCKEAN





N[EON]

Duotone/colour - 28 mins. - 2002

Eamonn Collinge - The Man

Eileen Daly - The Ghost

John Cale - Narrator

Original music by Dave McKean and Iain Ballamy

Music by Rachel's

Director of photography - Antony Shearn

CG animation and programming - Max McMullin

Produced by Simon Moorhead

Written, edited, designed, and directed by Dave McKean

This was my other first film. *The Week Before* and this one were shot together, and edited and composited at about the same time, although this film proved to be more complex. The CG scenes took ages to render. We would press Go, and get a grey bar with an estimated completion time of six days. Any mistakes would have to be tweaked and then six days later we'd see if it was better.

The ghost was played by Eileen Daly, who I had no idea was actually a bit of a Scream Queen, being the face of Redemption Films, and star of several UK horror films.

The idea for the film came out of time spent in Venice, my favorite city, wandering around at night, the slap of the water reflecting off the walls and bridges. Footsteps would echo and disappear. A population of ghosts seemed to exist there after the concerts had finished, the restaurants had served their last pizzas, and the shutters had come down.

In 1997 I went specifically to capture some footage that I thought I could use, shoot photos of the buildings and the square where I thought the story would take place, and record the atmosphere. At two in the morning, trying to record the water lapping up the steps, I slipped on the slimy seaweed, dropped the recorder into the water, and only just managed to grab the ear-phones connected to it. Too late to save the player, but I dried the tape and recovered all the sounds I'd recorded so far.

For the soundtrack I had fallen in love with the CD *Music for Egon Schiele* by Rachel's, an American indie band led by pianist Rachel Grimes. I had bought it because I loved the cover and packaging, and the title of course. I managed to contact Rachel through her label Quarterstick and she was happy for me to use a couple of pieces.

The rest of the music was written by me, and featured Iain Ballamy on sax. As I was finishing *N[eon]*, I was also designing and illustrating John Cale's autobiography, *What's Welsh for Zen*. When the book was published, we did a signing together in London, and John read a chapter to the audience. I really noticed his unusual Welsh by way of New York lilt. He phrased things very musically, and he placed emphasis and accents on unusual beats. I really loved it, and asked him if he would be up for being the voice of the narrator on my film.

N[eon] was finished late at night, in our small studio in Brixton. I remember wondering what to do with it. I ended up driving over to Tony Shearn's flat and making him watch it. I just wanted someone to see it.

N[eon] was accepted into Clermont-Ferrand, possibly the best short film festival in the world, and won first prize. I was setting up a huge retrospective exhibition of my work in Belgium at the time, but managed to get to the festival in time to introduce the film and take part in a couple of events, but sadly the awards ceremony clashed exactly with the opening of the Belgian show, so I couldn't make it.

After that, it was requested for several other festivals, and was accepted for Telluride, the ultimate film buff's festival in Colorado, and my first experience of that wonderful event. It was *The Week Before* and *N[eon]* that convinced Lisa Henson that I might be able to expand my bag of tricks to feature film length, and so Neil Gaiman and I headed into *MirrorMask* with the same 'hand-knitted film' attitude that informed these shorts.

As a final aside, our camera assistant on the studio-shot elements of *N[eon]* was the very young Laurie Rose, now a highly regarded feature film DP in his own right on *High-Rise*, *London Spy*, and *A Field in England*, amongst others.

Illustration created from texture maps used for the animated sets in N[eon].





Some of the photographs that I took in Venice at the same time as shooting the Super 8 mm footage for the film.

These images were published in *Option: Click*, a monograph of digital photos published in 1998, except the main image to the left, which was one of several left out of the book, mostly because they repeated elements, or because they felt less successful at the time.

This one includes the mannequin and a photo of Eileen Daly.

Dave McKean's latest film, *N[eon]*, is somewhat of an enigma. What is easy to say about it is that it runs twenty-eight minutes, is visually stunning and is the second film by McKean, who wrote, designed and directed it.

McKean's work is ubiquitous. He was the artist responsible for numerous graphic novels such as the acclaimed Batman title *Arkham Asylum*, the award-winning *Cages* and the recent *Pictures That Tick*. He has illustrated over 150 CD covers and produced campaigns for Smirnoff, British Telecom, Nike and Eurostar. McKean has also published three collections of photographs: *A Small Book of Black & White Lies*, *Option:Click* and *The Partide Tarot*, with an introduction by famed director and Tarot master Alejandro Jodorowsky. He created the title sequence for the BBC2 series *Nowhere*, and has directed various promos, picking up an MTV award along the way. He has also worked with writers Iain Sinclair, Neil Gaiman and Stephen King and collaborated on two Channel 4 films, *The Falconer* and *Asylum*, with film-maker Chris Petit and Iain Sinclair.

McKean's first was *The Week Before*, a short comic examination of how God found inspiration to create creation. McKean explains: "It was made to be a light-hearted silly film about the week before God made everything, so I wanted *N[eon]* to be more of a melancholy, introverted piece. I also wanted to work with a narrated story so that I could play with non-literal imagery and prove to myself that imaginative, surreal films could be made using desktop solutions and tiny budgets. I think with the shift from analogue to digital, we are seeing a shift from the literal to the expressionistic."

"I'm influenced by anyone who grafts their dreams onto film," McKean explains. "I'm absorbed by silent movies at the moment; the density of

the atmosphere, the layers that separate the viewer from the images, film grain, luminosity, the pulsing light of hand-cranked cameras, narrow depth of field, the irised image, cracks, dust, scratches and stains of time. All these textures add depth and humanity to the images, but allow you to deal with fantastical or metaphoric stories. You just don't get this with video images. Try and create that suspension of disbelief on video; everybody looks like actors in fancy dress."

The images in *N[eon]* are both surreal and expressionistic, echoing silent films, blue-tinted black and white, layered with textures and crackles and overlaid with a vignette mask. They evoke a sense of nostalgia, memories of faded dreams and, as in dreams themselves, the fantastic becomes real and the real fantastic. The first scene opens with Venice being approached by boat. The river mouth becomes a real mouth on a gigantic head, but instead we enter through the ear, where sound, made visible, leads us in.

The protagonist, an anonymous man, stands before a shop window gazing at a macabre dummy. Behind him in the square, surrounded by buildings with flattened perspectives, is the distant but approaching figure of a ghost, a naked woman. Perhaps all twenty-eight minutes are inside his thoughts: catching passing recollections, watching and hearing his meditations on Venice, Giorgione's painting *La Tempesta*, his friendships and his marriage. The imagery of surface textures, water, X-rays of paintings and masks also hint at hidden meanings. The only words are either the written ones that float through the film or those delivered in the voiceover monologue.

N[eon] started in 1998 by the grand canal in Venice, with McKean doodling the storyboard and writing the narration. Before shooting he had a very clear idea of what he was after. "Everything had to serve

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Graphics International
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that idea in the end," McKean explains. "I built the set, painted the mannequin, created the masks, shot all the Venice footage, wrote the music, edited and designed it all. The live action shoot happened three years before we finished the whole thing, but that was because life got in the way. It actually took about five months. The script changed slightly over the three years but the images changed a lot. I moved the whole thing into the digital realm a year after we started as I wanted to be able to improvise with the imagery.

The live action sequences in *N[eon]* were shot on super 16mm, the Venice footage on Super 8, and odd pick-ups on MiniDV. The computer-generated footage was created in 3D Studio Max and everything was then composited in After Effects, rendered on a network of four PCs and edited with Speed Razor. McKean also worked in Photoshop on his Mac. Despite all the digital technology, traditional film-making techniques were also used: the ghost, for example, was simply shot against black and then superimposed.

McKean worked with a small production team on the film. "It was a wonderful little team," he enthuses. "Simon Moorhead arranged the shoots and did several jobs on set, assisting me, the camera team and lighting. Tony Shearn lit the small set simply and correctly and always added ideas; the curtain reflected in the man's glasses, for example. Max McMullin helped create the computer images, and kept track of the hundreds of individual rendered layers. Iain Ballarmy played brilliantly on the music and Rachel Grimes was enthusiastic about using her music for the ghost sequences. It was self-financed and I didn't want a deadline, which was difficult to explain to others. It cost about £7,000 and everyone was paid, except Simon and myself."

Eamonn Collinge played the man, and 'scream queen' Eileen Daly was

the ghost. The only other part was the narrator, rock legend John Cale. McKean got to know Cale while designing and illustrating his autobiography, *What's Welsh For Zen*. "I did a signing with him, and he read a chapter to kick things off," explains McKean. "I remember noticing his wonderful conversational and lyrical tone of voice; Welsh by way of New York, accents in strange but interesting places – he made you listen to the words. I asked him if he'd be up for doing the narration, and, when he was passing through London on tour, I grabbed him for a couple of hours."

N[eon] was self-financed, and without a distributor or broadcaster involved there is no immediate distribution channel. McKean is currently in discussion with a German company to produce a DVD and VHS, featuring *N[eon]* and the earlier *The Week Before* as well as short pieces *Displacements*, *Sonnet No. 138* and the promo for *Buckhead*. However, until then, *N[eon]* is screening at various festivals – it recently had its premiere at the Rotterdam Film Festival. McKean's next venture is into the world of feature films and he's currently working on a script with Neil Gaiman for Henson's, developing another script for FilmFour, and adapting one of his graphic novels, *Signal to Noise*, among other things.

With *N[eon]*, McKean set himself the challenge to prove that imaginative films could be made with desktop equipment on a small budget. He has more than succeeded and the challenge now is for other film-makers to raise their ambitions and wake up to the possibilities of desktop film-making. "This city rewards attention," explains *N[eon]*'s narrator. "The longer you look, the more you see." And the same is true of the film. To paraphrase another famous film set in Venice, I can only urge you, *Do Look Now!*

