

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Akula Dream

By Professor George Barber



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor George Barber
Name of Output:	<i>Akula Dream</i>
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/5279/
Output Type:	Q – Digital or Visual Media; artist’s film
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p><i>Akula Dream</i> was conceived and disseminated as both a single screen work and as an installation, and has been disseminated as follows:</p> <p>10 October 2015, <i>Akula Dream</i> premiere at BFI London Film Festival, single screen</p> <p>1 October 2015 - 10 January 2016, <i>Akula Dream</i>, Chapter Arts, Cardiff, 3 month solo show, installation</p> <p>5 June - 1 November 2015, <i>By The Way</i>, Young Projects, Los Angeles, curated by Paul Young, 6 month solo show, installation</p> <p>September - November 2015, <i>Fences Make Senses</i>, Waterside Contemporary, London, 3 month solo show with screening of <i>Akula Dream</i> as part of artist’s talk and interview</p> <p>5 - 10 May 2016, Oberhausen Film Festival, Germany, single screen</p> <p>22 February - 27 April 2017, Video Box Le Carreau du Temple, Paris, installation</p>
Key Words:	Video art, installation, mixed genre, narrative
Funding:	Wellcome Trust Small Arts Award, 2014: £30,000

Synopsis

Akula Dream is a 27 minute video artwork designed for both single screen dissemination and gallery installation. The plot centres on the captain of a Russian submarine who, disaffected with his responsibilities, becomes increasingly interested in shamanic drumming, time travel and environmental politics. On an unspecified mission, Captain Pavel encourages his crew to use shamanic techniques to 'journey' outside the hull of their vessel. In their isolation from the world, deep beneath the sea, they come to see it more clearly.

Akula Dream is located in George Barber's *The Mindset Suite* series of films which resulted from his research at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies at Imperial College, London. These films collectively propose that poetry can be as effective as documentary in communicating the tragedy of war, politics, and environmental crisis. The series investigates the hidden ubiquity of military thinking and the state of constant war

in the modern world. Western governments tell themselves and their citizens that we live in a period of peace, but nonetheless are active in executing conflict in territories other than their own. *Akula Dream* explores this complex subject in a way that blurs film-making boundaries, hybridising the video art tradition with techniques of mainstream narrative film-making for cinema or television, and developing from the earlier works in *The Mindset Suite* series.

Akula Dream has been disseminated internationally through screenings at film festivals, installation at arts venues and through online streaming platforms. The supporting information presented here includes the research aims, context, processes and insights, stills from the film and the limited-edition booklet that accompanied the film. The film is submitted and should be viewed alongside the portfolio. Also submitted is a short preview of the film made for its installation at the Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff.



Akula Dream press shot



Akula Dream location shot

*Akula Dream location shot:
interior of submarine*



Akula Dream press shot



Context

George Barber's *The Mindset Suite*, of which this output is part, consists of seven films. All the works have been informed by research Barber undertook at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies at Imperial College, London. The Centre investigates the issues surrounding blast injuries through unique multidisciplinary collaborations of military medical officers and civilian engineers and scientists from around the world. Barber approached the centre with his Wellcome Trust-funded proposal and was invited to attend numerous lectures and events and to discuss the results of war and conflict with amputees, scientists, military doctors, students and engineers. Using this research, Barber employed a variety of methods to critique how power shapes society and how conflict, and its destructive consequences, becomes the norm.

Akula Dream, as one film within *The Mindset Suite*, is an artistic examination of the isolated, claustrophobic, military community in the setting of a submarine. Barber researched this subject through histories of submarine warfare. Barber's theoretical approach to filmmaking is largely Marxist and draws upon a number of theorists. For example, thinkers such as George Monbiot and Philip Slater are especially productive when considering shared values and communal cohesion. Within *Akula Dream* such a perspective is embodied by the character of Captain Pavel and his newfound vision. Barber also draws on the work of Hito Steyerl, Félix Guattari and Judith Butler, and in *Akula Dream* he employs their ideas around the connections between human beings, exploring this theme through the group of submariners and their relationships within the enclosed space of the submarine.

Barber also takes a Foucauldian approach by considering surveillance, globalisation, and the role of the police state in contemporary society. *Akula Dream* examines how power shapes society and maintains its grip. This context situates the film initially in the genres of war films and thrillers, but subsequently extends it through experimental techniques and

poetic themes in an unlikely mix of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Yellow Submarine* (1968), subverting these genres to consider planetary and ecological issues.

In its subversion of genres and combination of narrative and experimental filmmaking, the research is in the tradition of the essay films of Jean Luc Godard in which philosophical ideas 'transform what might have been a straightforward show-and-tell drama into something much more elusive' (Sterritt, 1999:8).

Akula Dream challenges the distinctions between mainstream film and artist's moving image. Where mainstream filmmaking remains largely realist and has a huge team of professionals that make the world believable and convincing, artists often prefer to record a process rather than following a script and usually avoid any quick-cut professional editing or slick camera work. Barber's research here proposes a hybrid form that recognises that the boundaries between these previously distinct modes are changing and blurring.

Akula Dream, like the other *Mindset Suite* films, was supported by a Wellcome Trust grant of £30,000.

REFERENCES

- Sterritt, D. (1999) *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyne, W.J. & Weir, G.E. (2003) *Rising Tide: The Untold Story of the Russian Submarines That Fought the Cold War*. London: Basic Books.
- Hutchinson, R. (2005) *Jane's Submarines: War Beneath the Waves from 1776 to the Present Day*. London: HarperCollins.
- Clayton, T. (2012) *Sea Wolves: The Extraordinary Story of Britain's WW2 Submarines*. London: Abacus.
- Prebble, S. (2013) *Secrets of the Conqueror: The Untold Story of Britain's Most Famous Submarine*. London: Faber & Faber.

Research Questions and Aims

Research Questions:

Can artists' moving image be used to discuss military, political and environmental ideas and communicate them in ways that are more affecting than news or documentary conventions?

Can classic realist narrative be integrated with artists' moving image?

Can the poetic be as powerful and effective as the documentary in communicating the tragedy of political, military and environmental issues?

Is it possible to make artists' moving image films that have an engaging plot, using compelling narrative yet clearly communicating a fine-art sensibility?

Research Aims:

Akula Dream is part of *The Mindset Suite*, a feature-length work composed of a series of artist's moving image pieces that propose that poetry can be just as effective as documentary in communicating the tragedy of war, politics and environmental issues. It is one of 7 stand-alone pieces which aim to convey the 'mindset' of our contemporary moment.

Akula Dream aimed to use wit and absurdity to convey the ordinariness of the military personnel who are in command of lethal force, and to show that submariners are very aware of their duty and troubled by their position in the world.

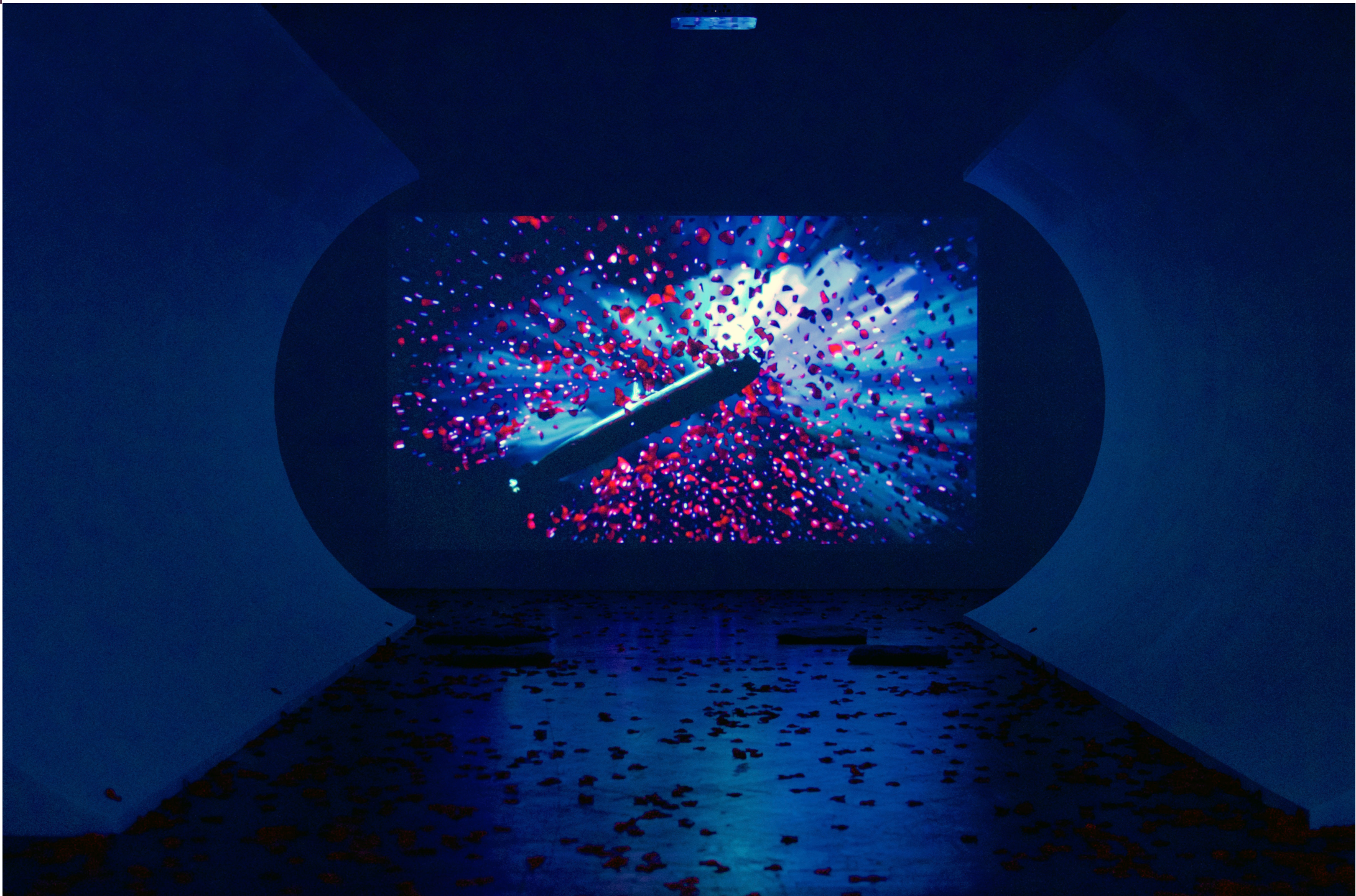
The research aimed to challenge the distinction between mainstream and experimental filmmaking.



Akula Dream film still

*When shown as an installation
the piece is projected within a
constructed set suggesting the
inside of a submarine.*

*Chapter Arts Akula Dream
installation shot*



Research Methods and Process

Reflecting upon the release of his 2013 work *The Freestone Drone*, which was shown at Tate Britain and in a solo show at Waterside Contemporary, Barber realised that his new art had many military, political and environmental themes. To develop these themes and create *Akula Dream*, Barber approached Imperial College London's Centre for Blast Injury Studies (CBIS), a research centre set up to deal with protecting troops from improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines. Professor Anthony Blunt, the head of CBIS, could see the connection between the centre and Barber's work, and agreed that Barber could join CBIS and make an artistic response to its research. Barber was free to access lectures, observe experiments and converse with staff and military personnel. *Akula Dream* was one result of this collaboration (which also led to other films in Barber's *The Mindset Suite*), funded by the Wellcome Trust.

Akula Dream employs a voice-over and conveys many of its themes through dialogue and language. Barber's unusual writing style combined with a plot about a Russian submarine captain who becomes interested in shamanic drumming makes a case for a merger that has elements of mainstream production but is also clearly video art. To evoke mainstream narrative filmmaking *Akula Dream* uses well-established actors (including Rick Leaf as Captain Pavel) and was shot on a real Soviet submarine. It thus has realist aspects in addition to working within recognisable war and thriller genres. However, the film is clearly also in the video art tradition, as it interweaves philosophical and ecological concerns with its narrative, and uses original CGI sequences which reference

Russian art rather than more conventional realist imagery of torpedoes firing out of submarine tubes.

These techniques highlight Barber's tendency to use familiar formats in unfamiliar ways. In all 7 films in *The Mindset Suite*, he employs narrative, poetry, music, abstract film-making, animation, voice-over, actors and improvisers in his ongoing attempt to straddle mainstream and avant garde artist's moving image and move away from the dominant and common uses of video in video art. An example is *We Need To Speak Tony* (2017) in which Barber briefed a group of professional improvisers with details about Tony Blair's visits to Iraq. The improvisers then reworked Blair's anecdotes and experiences and the film cuts together different improvisers bringing these 'memories' to life. The format encourages a poetic register and helps the audience to see Blair as a thoughtful well-meaning human being who is also strangely blind to the implications of his actions and locked into an extreme ideological position. This contrast occurs in *Akula Dream* too, where the submariners take part in strange shamanic dances and dream sequences deep down under the sea, juxtaposing realism and absurdity.

The short film format is also significant to this merger. Narrative film-making's now-ubiquitous format, with 7 seasons of 13 episodes, gives directors the time to explore strange non-realist sequences. However to combine these approaches within a narrative film that also preserves video art's short format is a challenge.



*Chapter Arts Akula Dream
installation shot*



Chapter Arts entrance with George Barber image

Research Contribution and Insights

New insights:

Akula Dream makes use of the fact that submariners frequently ponder existential themes. They spend days in silence, hiding in the ocean or on the sea floor. That nobody knows where they are is an integral part of their power. It is a monk-like existence, and full of time for reflection. From this simple insight, Barber began a process of investigation that eventually built into a serious philosophical drama that was shot on a real Soviet submarine. One of its contributions is to uncover this subject matter in an original way; Martin Herbert, editor of *ArtReview*, wrote of *Akula Dream*: ‘George Barber’s art has regularly taken aim at deleterious orthodoxies. At the bottom of the ocean, in a Soviet nuclear submarine, Captain Pavel has gone rogue, preoccupied with shamanic drumming and astral travels.’

In addition to its insights related to the subject matter, the research makes a formal contribution in challenging the distinction between mainstream and experimental filmmaking. It is original in mixing the genres of mainstream drama and artist’s moving image, proving that an experimental combination can work and still be communicative, innovative and exciting to watch.

Akula Dream has been well-received and shown around the world. The current public profile of *The Mindset Suite* has led to Barber’s recent nomination for 2021’s Derek Jarman Award and a new Arts Council funding grant to continue the research.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Follow-on-activities:

PRESS

In 2015 Barber was the subject of a 6-page interview in *Art Monthly*, Issue 390: <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/october-2015>

In the same year, *Frieze* published a double page feature on his work and influences: <https://frieze.com/article/life-film-1>

Barber's solo show at waterside contemporary was reviewed in 'Art Agenda', the review section of *E-flux*: <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/238075/george-barber-s-fences-make-senses>

Barber was a key interviewee in a BBC documentary about video art entitled *Kill Your TV: Jim Moir's Weird World of Video Art*. Numerous extracts from Barber's work were shown in the series, which was screened on BBC4 in November 2019.

EVENTS

In September 2019 Barber discussed his practice and use of appropriation with Lucy Soutter in a talk at TACO, including a screening of *The Freestone Drone*, *Basement Pool* and *Akula Dream*. The event accompanied *Scratch!*, an exhibition of Barber's works between 1983 and 2012.

ARCHIVES

At the behest of Adrian Glew, in 2019 the Tate Britain Library Archive invited Barber to deposit personal photos, drawings and other artefacts connected to his artistic career for the Library Archive collection.

In 2019 *Akula Dream* was acquired for the BFI National Film Archive, along with Barber's complete output to date.



Paul Young Gallery entrance



Paul Young Gallery entrance



*Paul Young Gallery Akula Dream
installation*

7

8.5. 20:00 Uhr 8:00 pm Lichtburg
9.5. 17:00 Uhr 5:00 pm Gloria



Akula Dream

Großbritannien Great Britain 2015
26'00", DCP, Farbe colour, Englisch English

Regie Director
George Barber

Buch Script
George Barber

Kamera Camera
Matt Gillan, Ricardo Dias

Ton Sound
Jack Trowbridge

Schnitt Editor
Lionel Johnson

Produktion Production
George Barber

Internationale Festivalpremiere
International festival premiere

1988: Ein sowjetisches U-Boot im Atlantik-Einsatz. Doch Kapitän Pavel verfolgt seine eigene Mission. „Akula Dream“ zeigt einen plausiblen, quasi-spirituellen, übersinnlichen Zwischenfall – durch den die Crew eine höhere Bewusstseinsstufe erreicht. 1988: A Soviet submarine is on duty in the Atlantic. But Captain Pavel is on his own mission. 'Akula Dream' presents a plausible quasi-spiritual cult incident – through which the crew enters an enhanced state of consciousness.

George Barber ist ein Videokünstler, dessen Arbeiten auf vielen internationalen Festivals, bei Wettbewerben sowie in Galerien gezeigt und auf der ganzen Welt im Fernsehen ausgestrahlt wurden. Seine Arbeiten wurden unter anderem in der Royal Academy of Arts, der Tate Britain, der Tate Modern, der Whitechapel Gallery und dem Victoria and Albert Museum in London sowie dem Centre Pompidou in Paris ausgestellt. Ihm wurden Retrospektiven am Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston und im Dundee Contemporary Arts gewidmet. *is a video artist whose works have been shown at many international festivals, competitions and galleries, and have been broadcast on television throughout the world. His work was shown at the Royal Academy of Arts, the Tate Britain, the Tate Modern, the Whitechapel Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, among others. He has also had retrospectives at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and Dundee Contemporary Arts.*

Filmauswahl Selected works Fences Make Senses 2014, The Freestone Drone 2013, Shouting Match India 2010, Welcome 2008, Automotive Action Painting 2006, Wake off Court 2003, Absence Of Satan 1985, Branson 1983

LUX, Matt Carter, Großbritannien Great Britain, +44 20 75033980, matt@lux.org.uk, lux.org.uk



Ang araw bag The day before

2050 bereiten sich die Philippiner auf den Tag vor, an dem der Wind sie jemals getroffen hat. Als Wind und Sturm einmündet. *In the year 2050, the Philippines prepares to hit the country. And as the wind and storm arrives.*

Lav Diaz ist ein Filmemacher von Cotabato, Mindanao, aufgewachsen als Produzent, Redakteur, Kameramann und Schauspieler. Er ist insbesondere bekannt für seine Arbeiten aus den Philippinen, die er als Regisseur, Autor, Produzent, Editor, Designer und Schauspieler. *He is especially known for his works from the Philippines who was born in Cotabato, Mindanao, grew up as a director, writer, producer, editor, designer and actor. He is especially*

Filmauswahl Selected works Hele 2012, Melancholia 2008, Ebolusyon 2002, Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buhay Barrio Concepcion 1998

Hazel Orenco, Philippinen Philippines



University for the Creative Arts
Research Portfolios

© Copyright All Authors

Graphic Design:

Studio Mothership

FRONT COVER
Akula Dream film still

BACK COVER
Chapter Arts Akula Dream
installation shot

