

# THE REPUBLICS (2020)

a B&W 16mm artists' essay film by **Huw Wahl**, drawn from the book by **Stephen Watts**, exploring landscape, history, memory and the power of words to celebrate and resist



*“I am moved and fascinated by Stephen Watts’ poetry in ways I find hard to explain and extraordinarily powerful to experience. He is among the most fine and subtle writers I know on the relations of landscape and mind.”*

**Robert MacFarlane**

## Synopsis

“ For four decades, poet, translator and activist Stephen Watts has been the quietly urgent, profoundly committed voice of the marginalised and the overlooked, whether person or place. He understands that the true ethical centre that matters lies at the edge, whether in the pull of outpost islands or the common ground of migrant streets. His tools are perennial witness and precise resistance through poem and prose, anchored in lyric anger for justice and praise song to the loved but fragile things. The language he deploys is one of dark illumination. His is fiercely internationalist writing, a challenge to the abuses of the age that is tense with solidarity, resonance and grace.

Now he has found his collaborative equal in the engaged 16mm filmmaker Huw Wahl, who has translated the text of Watt’s book-length prose poem *Republic Of Dogs / Republic Of Birds* into a luminous feature-length documentary essay of remarkable beauty and spirited attention. *The Republics* moves from the early 1980s to the present, and from London’s Isle of Dogs and Scotland’s Western Isles - where Watts lived and worked as a shepherd in his youth - to the mountains of Northern Italy: at once a topographic journey and a highly personal meditation on history, memory, identity and belonging.

Anchored in Watts’ biography and lines, it nevertheless explores the larger truths of being and the calibrations of response to often hard earned, lived experience. Considering the changing landscapes of settlement in London’s East End and Scottish islands, the destruction of working-class culture and an attendant sense of the collective, the film and its writing are themselves forms of cultural activism: elegy, celebration and a toolkit for ongoing resistance.

Never rhetorical, always endowed with a profound empathy and a deep sense of relation – to time, place and human struggle – *The Republics* is one of the most impressive artists’ films of recent years, whose own poetry speaks as honestly and eloquently as that of the writer it portrays. ”

**Gareth Evans** (Moving Image Curator, Whitechapel Gallery)



“ *Such free play of voice against finely calibrated shifts of light and atmosphere is intoxicating. Stephen Watts shapes a prose of rare integrity and grace. The poet’s generosity catches us off-balance, as we sift the local tide-line and the deep time-line of the islands... joining cause with the least visible and most valued citizens of this republic of words.* ”

**Iain Sinclair**



“ *Huw Wahl's new documentary [Action Space] is a meditative, visually rich portrait of this band of dreamers (...). It conjures up the possibility of a national canon of inflatable culture.* ”

**Sukhdev Sandhu,**

(Sight and Sound magazine,  
September 2016)

Stephen Watts is a poet and translator. He feels poetry as energy and breath, as body and spirit. Recent books of his own include *Ancient Sunlight* (Enitharmon 2014) & *Republic Of Dogs / Republic Of Birds* (Test Centre 2017). Prototype plan to publish his *Collected Poems* starting in 2022. Among recent co-translations are Adnan al-Sayegh's *Pages From The Diary Of An Exile* (Arc Publications 2016) & Golan Haji's *A Tree Whose Name I Don't Know* (A Midsummer Night's Press 2017). *Lemon Sun* by Ziba Karbassi is forthcoming in 2020. His mother's family are from the Italian Alps (his grandfather was a shepherd: poets are shepherds of words!) & he himself quit university and went to look after sheep on North Uist where he began to write poetry. Since 1977 he has lived mostly in Whitechapel, working as a poet in schools, hospitals & drop-in centres and in situations of shared language & health & well-being. He researches international poeties.

Huw Wahl is an artist filmmaker born in London in 1985. His award winning work has been screened internationally, featured in magazines *Sight and Sound* and *The Wire*, and received funding from organisations such as The Henry Moore Foundation, ACE, and the RPS. His film *Everything Lives: looking at the artist as father* (2016) screened at Open City Docs and was selected for the Future Shorts summer programme. *Action Space* (2016) won Prix Filaf d'Argent at FILAF film festival and the inflatable made as part of the film travelled to various places for screening and filming events, such as Flatpack Film Festival and Chelsea School of Arts in London. His first film *To Hell With Culture* (2014), about the poet, writer and anarchist Sir Herbert Read premiered at the ICA and numerous film festivals such as DOKU.ARTS in Berlin. He has also written in academic journals, magazines, given papers at conferences, and taught short film and photography courses in university and community settings.

## Film info:

Length: 83minutes | Year: 2020 | Format: HD B&W STEREO in DCP, MOV, H264

Directed, filmed and edited by **Huw Wahl**

Book readings by **Stephen Watts** from his book **Republic Of Dogs / Republic Of Birds**

Sound design by **Simon Connor** assisted by **Giorgio Carlino**

Produced by **Huw Wahl** with funding from **Arts Council England**

Trailer-link: [www.therepublicsfilm.com/trailer/](http://www.therepublicsfilm.com/trailer/)

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