

State of the Arts

By Mark Le Fanu

The “art-documentary” represents a specific sub-form of the documentary family as a whole. One-off films of sometimes considerable ambition about particular artists and their work, such movies used to be a staple element of the upper end of the more reputable tv schedules – occasionally breaking through the small-box barrier into limited theatrical release. In the UK, such films would find their natural home in long-running magazines like the BBC’s *Arena* or *Omnibus*, and on Channel 4, before it caved in to current commercial pressures. The genre encompasses everything from the conventional “talking heads discussing an artist’s work” to highly personal essay films like Stefan Schwieter’s lyrical study of yodeling, *Heimatklänge*, that I caught by chance earlier this year in Berlin.

That was during the film festival, in February. I was back in Berlin in the autumn for another event, this one specifically dedicated to arts documentaries. Curated by Andreas Lewin, it is called *Doku.Arts*, and was housed when I was there (but no longer – see below) in the Akademie der Künste, in the Tiergarten. If this year’s programme was anything to go by, the genre is flourishing. From many entries that could be singled out, let me mention a handful of remarkable films about photography (*Marti – The Passionate Eye* from New Zealand; Jennifer Baichwal’s *Manufactured Landscapes* about the work of the Canadian artist-ecologist Edward Burtynsky; the Dutch doc *Photo Souvenir* about Africa’s forgotten paparazzi of the sixties; finally a beautiful film about the emotional cost of being a journalist during Chile’s decade of civil unrest, *City of Photographers* [director: Sebastián Moreno]). Music, painting and literature were also represented by thoughtful and intelligent movies, 20 in all, with screenings nicely spaced out across the week.

So they are still being made, these idiosyncratic film essays, despite the contraction of traditional sources of funding. By now the story is well-known – indeed it is danger of being analysed to death. We know that television is no longer commissioning this type of programme in the way that it once did. The BBC, which once led the world in innovative arts documentaries, has all but given up. In a symptomatic cost-cutting exercise its Arts strand has recently been amalgamated with the Factual department,

placing it alongside History and Science, with corresponding savings all round. True, Arena, the flagship, survives still under the aegis of the respected editor Anthony Wall, but he is able to commission only a third of what he did, say, 15 years ago. Omnibus, meanwhile, has been folded into a new programme, Imagine, fronted by Alan Yentob. “Fronted” here is the operative word: it seems that the only way you get arts programmes made in-house is to have them hosted by some well-known “personality” – you have to be guided in and, as it were, led by the nose. The resulting product is television not film – or at least, it will tend to be biased towards entertainment values.

Nor does the situation seem to be very much better anywhere else: the contractions we are considering appear to be global, whether one is talking about the largest nations in the world or the smallest. In America, The National Endowment for the Arts, which used to sponsor 28 hours of quality primetime television a year, now sponsors only eight. Figures for a modest country like New Zealand are directly comparable – the state-controlled TV One’s arts slot has shrunk from about 20 one-hour programmes a year to less than half that amount. In Europe, France and Germany used to have Arte to rely on, but ratings paranoia appears to have struck here too, some observers even wondering whether the channel will exist in five years’ time. Plainly, there is a crisis. We know this. What to do?

I asked Shirley Horrocks, director of *Marti – The Passionate Eye*, what was her take on the issue. The documentaries she makes (she has directed some 40 in all, over a long period) tend to be small-to-medium scale, modestly budgeted though with consistently high production values. She reminded me that, although it is true that film equipment has got much cheaper over the years – theoretically putting the arts documentary within the reach of a much wider constituency of film-makers – time and travel are still expensive entities and always will be. The cost of bought-in footage increases as libraries cash in on their archives. Production values *don’t* come cheap, however commissioners juggle the figures. Like everyone I spoke to, she objects to the short-sighted “dumbing-down” on television that is a feature of our epoch, complaining that it is simply not true that there is not an appetite, on the public’s part, for well-produced programmes on the arts. On the contrary, she remarks, as visual culture becomes ever more commercial, “there is a growing hunger for ‘something completely different’.” Indeed it is the warm response of viewers, critics and commentators, letting her know this, that has kept her going through difficult times.

The new distribution platforms that everyone is talking about represent, in this context, a double-edged gift. Nobody seems to be quite sure whether they are a way out of the impasse or a symptom of the problem. Utilised astutely, it would seem to be logical that the new outlets provided by the internet, DVD, pay-per-view and so on can offer much needed alternative revenue streams. On the other hand – to take just the most touted of these – making the internet pay is not as easy as it seems, since viewers tend to be expect the service to be free. Keith Griffiths, partner (with John Wyver) of the UK company Illuminations Films and a well-known producer, believes that the *quid pro quo* involved in “making the new technologies work for producers” is that programmes themselves will have to be cheaper than they used to be. “Instead of £100,000 for an hour’s worth of art documentary, one might be talking about £25 to 35,000,” he says – which takes us back, in a way, to where we started. How do you keep up standards on such vastly reduced budgets?

In Denmark, the production house Sfinx Film provides an example of a small-scale company operating in the midst of these pressures, and staying buoyant. I spoke to Annette Mari Olsen who with Gitte Forup Randløv co-produced the Robert award-winning film *Lys på Lyd (Sound on Life)*, about the Danish *musique concrete* composer Else Marie Pade – one of many memorable movies at Doku.Arts. The company (mostly staffed by women, by the way) keeps going by nurturing a handful of well-chosen projects at any given time, not all of them necessarily art documentaries – there are children’s films in the catalogue, non-arts docs (currently Cecilie Trier’s *The Empty Space*), along with more bread and butter work like *Go’Dag Danmark*, a series of educational shorts produced to help integrate immigrants into the system. Sfinx gets by, Annette says, by choosing carefully, and doing everything themselves. (For example: she herself is a producer who directs, while Katia Forbert Petersen – co-director with Iben Haahr Andersen of *Sound on Life* – is a director who photographs; as few services as possible are brought in from outside.) *Sound on Life*, in fact, is an example of how difficult it is to get arts documentaries with integrity through the system these days; for although Else Maria Pade is a rather well-known figure in Denmark, her specialty, concrete music, is somewhat esoteric – neither visible nor sexy in current commissioning terms. It took two years and two producers plus an eight minute pilot programme to weave together the eight separate sources of finance that went into making a documentary that, for all its visual intelligence, is only 41 minutes long. Not

so long ago all of the costs of such a film would probably have been borne by a single television source.

The Australian producer Simon Nasht goes along with this. “As TV splinters into more and more channels there is less and less critical mass,” he says. “So it becomes increasingly difficult for them to promote the single, authored film. Even when such films are included within ‘strands’ they are being shifted to the margin of the schedule. This is a process that has been going on for many years now – a collective crisis of confidence amongst the broadcasters. Yet I would argue” he adds, echoing Shirley Horrocks, “that this is very shortsighted and self-defeating, since the re-emergence of the cinema doc proves that there is a substantial audience out there that is hungry for these films.”

That of course is what we would all like to believe. In the end, it *is* the belief of the film-maker that counts – his commitment to the value of what he is doing, and the possibility, come hell or high water, of implementing it. Mark Kidel, the director of one of the most striking movies I saw at Doku.Arts, *A Journey with Peter Sellars*, cautions me to remember that it has *always* been immensely hard to get projects off the ground. “Looking back to the 1970s when I started out as a film-maker, there was just as much philistinism and bureaucratic obstruction as there is today. Some aspects of human nature never change, unfortunately.”

Meantime, Doku.Arts finds itself without a home. Internal power struggles within the Akademie der K nst have resulted in the festival being expelled (a little unceremoniously) from the Tiergarten - a venue that suited it eminently. A pity, all round. It is a lovely festival. Any offers, anyone?

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