

Notes from the Amsterdam documentary film festival

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The International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (IDFA) is the largest documentary film festival in the world, and its coordinators deserve to be applauded--very few festivals achieve such a high quality in their selection.

At this year's event, held November 25-December 3, 191 films from 34 different countries were presented, with competition films divided between film and video. Other categories included *First Appearance* (for first time directors), *Platform* (this year dedicated to films from Third World countries), *Directors Choice* (10 films chosen by a leading international filmmaker), a retrospective on Nick Broomfield, *Highlights of the Lowlands* (a panorama of Dutch documentaries) and a showcase of the finalists from the second European Documentary Workshop.

Since its inception 11 years ago, IDFA has been dedicated to creative documentaries, films seeking to push and challenge the boundaries of so-called cinema verité. In standard documentaries, directors are often looked upon as editors rather than directors, piecing together and creating a story out of archived, researched and (importantly) unscripted material. But in many of the films shown at IDFA, directors are going one step farther and placing themselves in their work, either literally, or by way of artistic choices they make in presenting the material.

The creative documentaries at IDFA fell mostly into two categories: the docu-drama (in which key events or characters are dramatized), and what I call 'intimate films,' in which the filmmakers play central roles in the films themselves.

Docu-dramas

I find that docu-dramas with their dramatic reenactments tend for the most part to mystify and even make trite the events or people they are seeking to reveal. Even in the best docu-dramas, actors seem awkward and unbelievable, as if acting out real people and events requires a different, grander kind of acting. In the end, the characters they are trying to portray too often ring as falsely and embarrassingly heroic as those on Emergency 911.

Perhaps the most cohesive, least self-referential docu-drama was *O Cineasta da Selva*, Brazilian Aurélio Michiles's homage to Silvino Santos, a Portuguese-born filmmaker who spent most of his life creating painstakingly and lovingly shot films about the Amazon and its inhabitants. Australian Christopher Tuckfield's *A Breath*--on the lives of artist couple Huang Miaozi and Yu Feng--was a visually and theatrically beautiful film with its minimalist sets and creative use of Miaozi's calligraphy. But while Tuckfield and Michiles show that they're talented directors, their subjects suffer at the hands of their artistry. I left the films feeling as if I knew more the directors and their artistic bags of tricks than about the genuinely moving lives of Santos or Miaozi and Feng (the latter two, who were born in turn of the century China, would later survive imprisonment during Mao's Cultural Revolution).

Some documentary filmmakers apparently feel that audiences won't be

interested in their films if they don't include these dramatic touches, which sounds too much like Hollywood's write-off of the intelligence and depth of their audiences. At a post-screening question and answer period, Greta Schiller, director of *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* (about Cecil Williams, the theatre director and antiapartheid activist who was with Nelson Mandela the day the latter was arrested, and was even partially responsible for Mandela's arrest, much to his own despair), said that she wasn't sure how to pull together the many elements of Williams's life into a coherent story that would hold the audience's attention. She finally settled on a documentarized one--based on Williams's autobiographical writings. As narration this technique worked well, but as dramatically staged scenes during which 'Williams' spoke to the camera, it weakened the film tremendously.

Intimate films

Documentaries present something of our fascination with voyeurism, with peering into people's lives. And as television and film have left few corners of physical geography unprobed, the camera turns inward. Serious and self-indulgent filmmakers alike are increasingly turning their film and video cameras on their friends, neighbors or themselves. The examples of these kinds of films at IDFA ranged from the truly tender to the almost unendurable.

Filmmaker David Zeiger, saddened by the fact that he'll soon 'lose' his only son to adulthood, follows 16-year-old Danny and his marching band friends around for a year. What emerges in *The Band* is a refreshingly human depiction of American teenagers, children leaving behind childhood and grappling with problems that affect many teenagers, but Americans seemingly more so than most. Problems such as anorexia, being (over)dosed with Ritalin and Prozac for problems that may in fact never have existed and the extreme pressure of deciding one's future and leaving home at the vulnerable age of 17 or 18. Zeiger lets the kids speak for themselves, without falling into cheap sentimentality or stereotyping.

Fatherless, on the other hand, by student director Yoshiya Shigeno, is an account of Shigeno's friend's struggle to come to terms with a loveless relationship with his mother, his estranged father, and his uncontrollable desire to mutilate himself. It was unbearable to watch this young man's torment, and a questionable decision on the part of Shigeno to have even filmed it, even if his friend eventually makes tenuous peace with his parents and himself. I agree that psychological exorcism is necessary--it is what art is often based upon--but self-indulgence without introspection is what I call 'Oprah Winfrey art,' when artists clamor to raise the ante of emotional gratuity without offering any intelligent analysis whatsoever of the subjects they purport to expose.

Two of the most memorable films at IDFA, which used the personal to comment on the political, were *Julia's Madness* and *Intervista Quelques Mots Pour le Dire* (*Intervista, Finding the Words*). *Julia's Madness* is (East) German director Hannes Schönemann's intriguing search to piece

together what really happened to his former Danish lover Julia, who committed suicide and who, in the last years of her life, was dismissed as a paranoid fabricating an imaginary involvement with the Danish secret service. He uncovers that Julia was indeed used by the Danish government to infiltrate the Stasi (the East German secret police). Without ever straying from Julia's story, Schönemann paints an insightful picture of what many 'spies' must really be like. Not debonair martini-drinkers, but fragile and vulnerable people who are easily manipulated and, in the end, broken by the double lives they're forced to lead.

A man Schönemann tracks down in Israel, who knew Julia, muses that eventually most spies display symptoms of psychosis, and are unable to distinguish between reality and fiction. Julia's 'madness,' and her preoccupation with saving the world from the evils of Communism, only grew as the Cold War receded, in a desperate attempt to validate a lifetime of betrayal and dishonesty.

In *Intervista*, 24-year-old first-time director Anri Sala uncovers old footage of his mother delivering a speech at an Albanian Communist Youth Alliance meeting in the 1970s. Because the film has no sound, Sala enlists a lip reader to help decipher what his mother is saying. When shown the subtitled film, Sala's mother is appalled at the empty rhetoric she's espousing, and begins to recall her days in the Communist Party, and under what she thinks of as Communism.

In a series of frank conversations with her son (who's behind the camera), Sala's mother reevaluates her fear of and loyalty to the party, even apologizing for the situation her generation created (though she doesn't negate the strength of many of her earlier convictions, nor the good she and her friends did--building roads, schools, hospitals). She is heartened by the fact that her son's generation can doubt and question what they are told more openly than hers could. Yet she echoes the sentiments of the cameraman-turned-taxi driver who filmed the Youth Alliance meeting, in saying that she is more afraid now than under Stalinism, because nobody seems to know where the future of Albania's very shaky present is headed, or how to stop its downwardly violent spiral.

There were, of course, traditional documentaries at IDFA, the best of which, in my opinion, were ironically also the most original and powerful films at the festival. *Divorce, Iranian Style*, by filmmakers Kim Longinetti and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, became the most talked about film at the festival. Showing us further proof that ordinary Iranians have an uncanny ability to act naturally in front of the camera, the film focuses primarily on three women undergoing the difficult and often humiliating experience of obtaining a divorce, in a country where judges can declare a girl eligible for marriage as soon as she reaches puberty.

By the end of the film, the filmmakers have gotten involved in the stories themselves and even lie to the less-than-sympathetic judge on behalf of one young woman trying to regain custody of her children from her ex-husband who believes the girls don't need to receive an education. But the most eloquent scene is of an improvisation by a judge's six-year-old daughter who nabs his chair and gavel when he steps out of the room. At first mimicking her father's proclamations ('I can't give you the house without his permission'), she delightedly bangs the gavel and pretends to rule the courtroom. Soon, however, she gets so caught up in her play-acting that she begins a telling conversation with one of the imaginary husbands, asking him why he thinks it's alright to ignore or beat his wife the way he does, when she has no choice but to cook and clean for him, and to be his servant. It is a chilling look at just how young Iranian girls are when they already begin to understand their tragic situation.

Winner of the Fipresci Award, first-time Belgian director Dan Alexe's *Les Amoureux de Dieu (Howling For God)* tells the story to two rival Sufi sheiks in a Macedonian village. Without ever being disrespectful to their beliefs, Alexe shows that their rivalry has little to do with their clash over religious rites and practices, as they contend, but with each man's secret

desire to hold greater power than the other.

A film about 1960s spaghetti Western, *L'America a Roma*, is a mix of nostalgia and political lament. Director Gianfranco Pannone and ex-stuntman Guglielmo Spoletini visit forgotten movie stars, abandoned film studios and the sites used to film the 'prairie' and 'canyon' scenes--a small patch of green in the suburbs of Rome. Though they disliked their recurring roles as Mexican bad guys, most of the stuntmen admit they identified with the Mexicans who were forced off their lands, out of their homes, or just killed.

Pannone's film enters more political territory as he likens the physical expansion of Rome to the expansion of nineteenth century America. The film ends with a series of scenes thought up by Spoletini, who has become inspired to make another spaghetti Western, this time about Mexican bandits who enter a time warp and find themselves in modern-day Rome. The final scene, of Spoletini and two other actors, dressed as Mexicans, walking their horses across through the traffic of a busy Roman street, is perhaps more powerful than anything else Pannone tries to say about the burial of humanity under Rome's capitalist, industrial sprawl.

Two other films that stood out were both on the oppressed condition of women, at opposite ends of the earth. The first, *Taehiti*, is about an aspiring Swedish actress who is chosen to star in a Bengali film, filmed in Bangladesh. Her co-star Shangita, one of Bangladesh's best-known actresses, has wealth and adulation, but also incurs public contempt for being a 'fallen woman,' which all actresses represent. Shangita and the film's producer fall in love on the set, and by the end of shoot are discussing marriage, but only if she gives up her career so that he will not be shamed.

Bajo el Limpido Azúl de Tu Cielo (Blue Under Your Sky) was a controversial film which won many accolades (though no awards). Directors Felipe Cordero and Hilda Hidalgo Xirinach interview women convicted of infanticide, clinical psychologists, and even random men on the streets of San Jose, in an attempt to show the oppressive cultural and economic factors that govern the lives of poor Costa Rican women.

None, however, captured the innate human desire and need for self-expression as compassionately or unpretentiously as Japanese director Sako Makato. His film *Mahiru No Hoshi (Artists in Wonderland)* follows seven mentally handicapped artists who, rather than being marginalized or condemned to lives of unproductive silence, are urged to express themselves artistically. Each is a distinct and dedicated artist in his own right. Ito Yoshihiko, a shy man who mumbles 'It's a pity, a real pity' all day long, explains repeatedly that all of his work comes from the heart. His heart, and the hearts of the other six artists, however, are difficult to comprehend, as words are not their tools of communication. Instead, they draw or sculpt or turn their Tourette-like outbursts into video installations, providing not only a window to their souls for us to glimpse into, but an even more important outlet through which all that is stored in that intricately layered place can come out.

Without the use of narration or artistically self-referential gimmickry, Makato neither pretends to be a fly on the wall (the artists speak to or simply stare at the camera on several occasions), nor on a sociopolitical quest to show the state of the mentally handicapped in contemporary Japan. Instead, he masterfully shows us what it means to be alive, what it means to have something to 'say,' and how being allowed to express ourselves--and being heard by sympathetic listeners--may be our most important triumph.

Kazuo Hara

Controversial Japanese director Kazuo Hara--who put together this year's Director's Choice, a showcase of Japanese contemporary life, primarily from the 1960s and '70s-- is one of those documentary filmmakers who asks whether a 'documentary' is ever wholly truthful,

when everyone who is being filmed is conscious of it and thereby actually plays the game?' The answer to me, is No, regardless of whether or not filmmakers fictionalize or manipulate their films in any way. But that does not preclude sincerity, one of honesty's most important factors. The question then becomes whether or not filmmakers are sincere in their efforts and, in the case of documentary filmmakers especially, respectful of their subjects.

Hara's own films push numerous limits. In *Kyokusiteki Erosu Koi-uta 1974* (*Extremely Private Eros Love Song 1974*) he follows his ex-girlfriend after she's left him and even films his own breakdown after having seen her with her new boyfriend; in *Yuki Yukite Shingun* (*The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*), the only reason he didn't film his subject's almost fatal assault of another man was because he wasn't informed of it in time.

When filming *Fatherless*, Shigeno, troubled by how personal the subject matter was becoming, asked his teacher Hara how far a filmmaker should go before turning off the camera. Hara's advice was apparently, 'all the way.' This raises a serious question not only about privacy or morality, but also about what exactly it is documentary filmmakers are searching for? If Hara is truly searching for the 'blurred border between reality and fiction,' as one critic put it, is he ever going to find it? Does such a border exist, and would it really be photographable? Yet Hara is an intelligent filmmaker and his films feel neither inauthentic nor self-indulgent. Introspection, curiosity and disdain for the false or superficial are critical elements of any sincere art. Hara recognizes this and his search for truth, as poetic or brutal as it is elusive, is sincere. But not everyone has his sensitivity or sensibility, and thus a generation of documentary filmmakers is being raised on this 'all the way' mentality, with mixed results.

See Also:

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