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## ❖ International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) 19-29 November 2009

Reviewed by Hart Cohen

For those who are not familiar with this film festival, IDFA is one of the most prolific events on the documentary film calendar with over 300 films from 61 countries selected for screening. Despite the number of films screened (the catalogue runs to almost 300 pages), the festival is highly regarded for its selectivity (2500 films were submitted).

In general terms, it offers the full range of documentary – from shorts to features – and holds competitions in five categories: features, shorts, mid-length, first appearance and student. Beyond this there are directors' retrospectives, children's programs and the festival functions as an important marketplace. This review of IDFA '09 gives an account of the kinds of documentary films that make it into this prestigious festival focusing, in particular, on Australian documentary films.

Of the 17 films screened for the feature documentary competition, a number stand out for special mention – two of which were Australian. Two films were awarded in this section – *Last Train Home*, a Chinese-Canadian co-production, which took out best feature documentary and *The Player*, which was awarded best Dutch film in the competition. *The Most Dangerous Man in America* (Ehrlich and Goldsmith) was awarded best film outside the competition (see below).

The two Australian entries were well attended by appreciative audiences. *Contact*, directed by Martin Butler and Bentley Dean, recently had its ABC debut and was awarded in 2009 as Best Documentary at the Sydney Film Festival. In the tradition of Connolly and Anderson (*First Contact*), the film tells the story of a group of Aboriginal women and children who lived in a remote part of Central Australia targeted for missile testing in 1964. The film recovers archival footage of the first contact between white patrol officers and the women and children at the time of the missile test. A Martu woman, Yuwali, narrates from her perspective what it felt like seeing "whites" for the first time ("... devil men who would eat them ..."). One of the patrol officers involved gives his view of the meeting, and the subsequent evacuation, ("... we could have done it much better ...").

The film uses archival footage of first contact with Martu people living in the desert in the 1960s. In juxtaposition to the archival material, the film presents the Martu who have survived to the present and who are the central characters that drive the narrative of the film. As with *First Contact*, the film ends with a screening of the archival footage for the pleasure and

amazement of Aboriginal people living at the mission. There is much to value in this film, from its commitment to the Aboriginal voice, to its innovative cinematography and use of the archive.

The other Australian film in the features competition was *The Miscreants of Taliwood* by George Gittoes who is well known for his commitment to war zones as artist and documentarian. In this remarkable film, Gittoes has placed himself in the Swat valley. His hosts are a group of video-makers of generally lowbrow movies that are censored by the Taliban – ferocious to what they consider to be un-Islamic cultural production. In what was possibly the riskiest of documentary films, Gittoes decides to bankroll, act and produce two of these “Taliwood” films in the face of censorship to both challenge the Taliban and support a community of artists. At this point the film veers into hilarity – it’s completely over the top. It then veers into ugly territory, highlighting the Taliban’s use of videos that depict beheadings with the purpose of imposing terror for maximum effect. I staggered out of this film not entirely sure of what, exactly, I had experienced, and while Gittoes was in attendance and fielded a Q & A afterwards, the only certainty was that he was, indeed, still alive.

In a film relying on archives from the sixties, *The Most Dangerous Man in America* (Ehrlich and Goldsmith) tells the story of Daniel Ellsberg’s transformation from an important defence analyst in the Pentagon to the person who would leak what became known as the *Pentagon Papers* to the *New York Times*. The material that Ellsberg leaked showed the extent of the deception by successive US governments on foreign policy related to Vietnam. The film is an exhaustive and comprehensive presentation of both the context and the person of Ellsberg in what was a turning point in marshalling support for opposition to the Vietnam War.

The winning feature film, *Last Train Home* (Lixin Fan), documents internal migrant workers in China who, in their millions, gravitate to the city factories of the Pearl River Delta. The title refers to the intense challenge of workers trying to return home for Chinese New Year. This motif is however, only a surface concern of the film. The real story goes into the emotional consequences for children and families when the parents are absent for most of the year. This film also sustains an observational film style – one that is now hard to find in contemporary documentary where the presence of the filmmaker on screen is a constant motif. This was a refreshing return to the observational ethos in documentary with exceptional cinematography to buttress the comparisons of country and city in China. But it was the stellar performances of the family members who opened their lives to the filmmaker Lixin Fan (writer/director, cinematographer, co-editor) that makes this a compelling film.

In the mid-length and short category, the winner was the Korean film *Iron Crows*, (Bong Nam Park) about the hazards for those who must work a ship demolition yard. A film by Australian veteran documentary director, Curtis Levy, called *The Mathilda Candidate*, competed in this category and was well received by the IDFA audience. *The Mathilda Candidate* is an affectionate and at times revealing engagement with “Waltzing Mathilda”, Australia’s ‘unofficial’ national anthem. The film documents Levy’s senate campaign running on the promise of making “Waltzing Mathilda” Australia’s official national anthem to replace “Advance Australia Fair”. Not quite a mockumentary, much of the campaigning is tongue-in-cheek while interviews with a wide range of Australians reveal some surprising views on the subject.

Other films worthy of mention are *The Cove*, (Psihoyos, 2009) on the slaughter of dolphins near a small town in Japan, winner of the audience favourite award; *The Yes Men* (Ollman. Price, Smith 2003) and *The Yes Men Fix the World* (Birchbaum & Bonano, 2009) – favourite with IDFA crowd – films that feature two Americans who set up fake corporate websites to

entrap various constituencies and then perform fraudulent presentations at conferences/events to highlight corporate sins around the world; *Videocracy*, Erik Gandini (2009) a documentary about Berlusconi's control over and programming of Italian television; *The Shock Doctrine* (Winterbottom/Whitecross, 2009), a screen adaptation of Naomi Klein's book that reviews and condemns Milton Friedman's economic and political views of how to use 'shock tactics' to advance American capitalism in underdeveloped nations; *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finklestein* (Ridgen & Rossler, 2009) a biopic on the controversial and contradictory life of Norman Finklestein, a New York-based academic whose family perished in the Holocaust but who adopted strident criticisms of Israel and Zionism and notoriously was dismissed and refused tenure after publically criticising and accusing Alan Dershowitz of plagiarism; *Sins of my Father* (Entel, Columbia, Argentina, 2009), a film about the son of notorious Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar who attempts to reconcile with the sons of Escobar's victims in Colombia who themselves have ascended to political positions in that country.

In the dozen Australian documentary films presented at IDFA, there is sufficient indication of a kind of trend in the dominant mode of performance'. The director is generally on-screen and is anchored by voice-over narration. The incorporation of the filmmaker as an actor in the film is implicated directly in the narrative as it evolves. The Australian films that utilised this strategy are, *I. Psychopath* (Walker, 2008), an interrogation of psychopathology in the character of Sam Vaknin with the inevitable question as to who is the real psychopath – the director or the subject; *The Snowman* (Levant), a film about the director's father who tracks the mystery surrounding her father's disappearance and illness; and *A Good Man* (Uberoi), a film about an outback Queensland family in which the husband supports his disabled wife with a novel idea – running a brothel in the local town as a means of dealing with the drought. This pretext allows the filmmakers to show how the family comes to terms with having a member of the family in need of love and care and how they enact this on a day-to-day basis. (This film had a wonderful reception with a sell-out audience at 10 am!)

This trend towards self-insertion in pro-filmic space shows an interest in displaying the key relationships in the film and the desire to project a kind of intimacy in those relationships. The presence of the filmmakers may also be seen as a means of marking out authorial presence and as a way of defining the sources for the concepts and arguments as well as the knowledge interests of the film.

The presence of the filmmaker in the pro-filmic reality of the work is not a new device in documentary (e.g. *David Holzman's Diary*). The prevalence and emphasis on this mode of narrative however, may be a response to the perception that directors may be losing their independence to the whims of broadcasters who have been seeking to maximise audiences. In doing so, it is yet to be seen how this may be at the expense of originality and the challenges to audiences that independent filmmakers seek to bring to the screen.

Visit the IDFA website for more on this and upcoming events:

<http://www.idfa.nl/industry.aspx>