

Heavyweight Planet / Lightweight Nation

In dark times like these and in a shoestring country like Scotland especially, there is a need more than ever for the Document Human Rights Film Festival to be recognised as a significant cultural event and an artistic force for the good.

In a small nation that seems to perpetually struggle with itself and with its own identity, we need to face up to a stark situation where – if we are not careful – the cultural agenda will not be created by but marketed at us as residents, audiences and cultural producers alike, by a centralised elite.

There has never been in this respect more of a need for creative 'independence' (rather than Creative Industries) in exhibition and all forms of cultural production, particularly at a time when the fall-out from the War on Terror is affecting all of us now on a daily basis.

So what can we do in such an embattled (rather than embittered) situation as 'independent' filmmakers and free-thinkers who want to deal with the serious stuff, rather than the lightweight lifestyle culture that our nation is becoming synonymous with? Well we can start by reclaiming that much abused word 'independence' from its trendy and kiddy-on Corporate misappropriation. Because what I'm getting at here is a human right: Independence is a positive facet of our civil liberties and a flagship for any Social Democracy. It's also a term which all too often is too readily dispatched as an agent of cultural curtailment.

In dealing with the Document Festival, let's forget about any 'Brit-Doc' style branding with its 'Cool Britannia' undertones, nor let us retreat into the petty, self-interested, art world nationalism that's currently being cultivated here in Scotland. Let's instead start to talk about Internationalism. Document Festival's besieged presence in the international film festival calendar is crucial. Not just for dissident filmmakers around the planet, whose numbers grow in attendance at the event year by year (unlike the Festival's budget it has to be said), but also for a native audience who are angered, impassioned and even saddened by the lives and worlds that are represented; worlds that may equally be 5,000 miles or just 5 minutes away from where you sit and read this.

Look around you at this festival and you'll find it thankfully cultural guru and celebrity free. Look on the screen and you'll see faces and meet folk in the audience who are living proof of what I'm on about here. The witnesses to all manner of horrors. Victims yes, but more importantly survivors and fighters too.

We sometimes need to remind ourselves that as filmmakers we are also an audience facing an increasingly formatted, over-prescriptive and

heavily censored future. An audience, too, that doesn't necessarily just want to be entertained but also educated and informed by what can broadly be termed documentary. Yet perversely not understanding an audience (i.e. ourselves) is an argument that – with the exceptions of a few beleaguered and honourable individuals – many TV executives and festival curators consistently use against the kind of films and filmmakers on show at Document Festival.

Blacklisting, professional traducement and censorship aside, who'd believe that film festivals would turn films down because they were too long, too short, or more to the point didn't suit a sponsors branding mix?

In terms of content production, it's sad that an over-compliant, lifestyle-obsessed 'independent' mainstream media industry has been bought-off and sold-on so cheaply. This process of selling out and market consolidation has resulted in a profession that should know better, turning a blind eye to the legacy of the forgotten holocausts on the planet. It creates a culture where contemporary history is dismissed with a celebrity-led 'been-there-done-that' attitude, while global conflict and geo-politics are often mostly dealt with in a dumbed-down manner; as glorified travel shows, fronted by dare-doing presenters.

Sadly, also out on the frontline of the world's conflict zones, the rising body count of freelance journalists and many aspiring young filmmakers attests to the fact that never have there been so many people that would seem to be producing so little in pursuit of a lifestyle as a war reporter. While in terms of the international press corp, it's shocking to see just how quickly the pan-global corporate media can react in times of crisis, yet how slowly humanitarian relief operates and is hampered in getting where it matters.

So just why is it when the technology for both the production and exhibition of documentaries has made it easier for us to do our own thing, or to choose what and where we see things, has it really come to this? Despite claims that technology has had a 'democratising' effect on our lives, why is it that we are still stuck with a mainstream where the same group of privileged folk (an observer class) who believe they are the only ones capable of making, distributing, commissioning and even curating the documentary form? Are these really to be our role models as aspiring filmmakers, or the filmmakers that we see at Document Festival who duck, dive and survive on a daily basis and work with a cultural urgency that is often missing here in the UK?

In the UK, mainstream documentary continues to be a product of a privileged gaze. A gaze that

comes not from an intimate, native or even naïve perspective, nor from an artist's viewpoint, but from a calculated 'objective distance'. It's for the most part an outsider's view of things – a gaze that cuts across gender divides, sexual preferences and ethnic origin. It's a gaze that has a lot to do with birth right (there's still a belief in some quarters that people 'inherit talent'), and also a perspective that involves the championing of the 'Grierson tradition'. But, it's sometimes forgotten that John Grierson's legacy is not just a documentary tradition but also probably one of corporate video culture too. That the 'cultural' tradition of 'social observation' is a form of hegemony that's steeped both in the chaos of the class struggle and also in the dodgy-geezer practises of the secret state's surveillance activities. Surveillance never has and never will be benevolent, and nor can any system of privilege be, for that matter.

George Orwell once said 'that in a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act...' It's sad to think that a freedom of expression that we have been brought up to cherish and take for granted, has been undermined to such an extent that there are many filmmakers in the UK now who aren't making the films they really want to make, simply because they are scared. Scared of saying what they want to say or even of producing films that come from the heart as much as the head, for fear of being left out, marginalised and it has to be said blacklisted by a paranoid and vindictive mainstream.

Document 4 shows that there is another way – films that are served up as an antidote, a resistance and most importantly a showcase of films and filmmakers that positively prove that there is still a sense of genuine independence out there. The festival with its topical discussions that want to get closer to defining our world also shows that we are in fine critical health – as filmmakers and as an audience – and that we aren't going to go away, in the same way that our subject matters aren't.

Doug Aubrey