

# FILM

## Essay Film Festival

BIMI and ICA London 24 to 29 March

The Essay Film Festival, held at the Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image and the ICA, featured a diverse programme of screenings and discussions with artists, filmmakers and film theorists. Although the programme notes described the festival as 'inaugural', hinting at future events, Laura Mulvey (an organiser of the festival) referred to the BFI's 2013 film series on the essay film, suggesting an already laid foundation that the organisers here were attempting to build on. The festival began with a symposium on the question 'why the essay film now?', inviting film scholars to debate the vibrancy of the essay film tradition in contemporary moving-image culture. The temporality of this question was explored in Laura Rascaroli's presentation by drawing on Theodor Adorno's theory of the essay form's 'untimely' nature. As Adorno put it, 'the contemporary relevance of the essay is that of anachronism'. In contrast to Adorno, however, and as Rascaroli pointed out, filmmakers and writers, from Sergei Eisenstein to Hans Richter and Alexandre Astruc, repeatedly commented on the novelty of the essay film, linking it to a new type of cinema that gives body to the invisible world of thought. Rascaroli questioned whether certain historical moments necessitate essayistic practices, such as the emergence of critical documentaries in the 1960s, and how such auteurs reflexively inscribed themselves into the purported objectivity of the form. Similarly, Igor Krstic's talks tended to focus on the personal or diary film, with Krstic examining its relation to exile in what he problematically termed 'accented essay films', such as Jonas Mekas's *Lost, Lost, Lost*, 1976. Such individualism seemed to be in tension with the stated transnational and collective scope of Krstic's project, a concern manifested in the festival's screenings of work by the Otolith Group and the reflexive *Profession Documentarist*, 2014 (a film by seven female filmmakers on making documentaries in Iran today). Christa Blümlinger focused on what she termed 'second-hand cinema' (film that recycles found footage), which was deployed in order to revisit Peter Wollen's 1975 article 'The Two Avant-Gardes' – namely artist structural film and experimental cinema. Blümlinger sketched out her recent project, which attempts to construe these two traditions and their reconvergence today through their like-minded thinking through of history in filmic form.

Film's complex relation to history and memory was a theme that recurred throughout the festival,

such as the session titled 'Rediscovering Esfir Shub'. A contemporary of Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, Shub's films are an early example of what are now termed compilation films and we can see her work as a precursor to video essays such as Rania Stephan's found-footage essays or the online 'desktop documentary' work of Kevin B Lee. Just as the literary essayist compiles quotes, so the film essayist compiles film clips. This notion shifts the primary site of essay film production, with its strong idea of an auteur, into the more anonymous space of the editing room. As Esther Leslie pointed out, this dark interior of post-production has often been occupied by women. One of Shub's jobs was to re-edit newsreel footage and foreign titles to make them 'ideologically correct', a technique that Graham Roberts argued gave her an ability to take enemy footage and twist it, producing new meanings from old stock. As Leslie noted in relation to Shub's re-editing practice, 'film never stops being a document even when fictional – or especially then'. The idea of fiction film used as document, as well the compilation aesthetic, is epitomised by Thom Andersen's recently remastered 2003 video essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself*. 'If we can appreciate documentaries for their dramatic qualities,' as the narration observes, 'perhaps we can appreciate fiction films for their documentary revelations.' In the film, the history of the city of Los Angeles, especially the destruction of public space, is examined with the help of the city's unconscious indexer, Hollywood fiction film. The narration of a city's history by compiling filmic images and voice-over was also on show in Peter von Bagh's *Helsinki, Forever*, 2008, albeit told in a more upbeat way when compared with Andersen's monotone narrator.

Andersen's latest film, *The Thoughts That Once We Had*, 2015, which played to a sold-out audience at the ICA, is more pensive than previous overtly political documentaries, such as *Red Hollywood*, 1996 (made with Noël Burch). The film is partly based on a course Andersen teaches on Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema* books, for which he collected all the film clips discussed in the texts. In the film, quotes by Deleuze become intertitles to riff off, often refracting the text through personal memories (such as a section on the actress Deborah Paget titled 'My favourite actress') or allowing clips to speak for themselves and using music to amplify the affectivity of the cinematic image. As Andersen commented, recalling Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, 1998, it is not 'a death of cinema movie. We are now in the age of cinema more than ever. Now all arts aspire to the condition of cinema.'

Godard was the pivot for discussion in the session with artist Constanze Ruhm. In a photographic project she produced in collaboration with 'cine-tourist' Roland-Francois Lack, the pair sought out filmic locations in Godard's 1962 film *Vivre Sa Vie*. These locations were rephotographed from the point of view of Godard's camera (and male gaze), which Ruhm countered by producing the gaze of what Anna Karina would now see. This framework allowed Ruhm not only to measure the historical change of Paris but also to discover stories excluded from Godard's narrative frame. The cinephilic obsession of revisiting cinematic locations, combined with the constructing of a feminine gaze, here became an archaeological practice of discovering buried (her)stories.

Andersen's 1975 film *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer and Red Hollywood* examine marginalised and repressed figures in film history in order to think how the present could have been different. Both revisit a time when cinema could have gone in a different direction. In the former, the narrator compares the scientific ambition of Muybridge with the Lumière brothers, who considered their own invention a crude toy, just as Thomas Edison considered his a silly little device for making 'pictures that could dance'. By putting films and images back into their historical contexts, essayistic practices reveal a captivating form of historical research, which is both theoretical and aesthetic, producing imaginative investigations of history through moving image – they make history dance. ■

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