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## News from the Future of Public Media IDFA, Ivens, Oranges and More

Posted by Patricia Aufderheide on Nov 30, 2009 at 10:55 AM

If you want to take the pulse of documentaries as interventions in public life, the International Documentary Film Festival at Amsterdam (IDFA)—which just wound up on Sunday—is an excellent stop. The largest international documentary film festival in the world, it exhibits hundreds of films, takes in thousands of international visitors, attracts passionate audiences that pack theaters on a Sunday morning for impossibly obscure experiences, and hosts a vigorous market. It focuses on documentary with a social agenda, rather than the burgeoning field of “factual entertainment.” Sure, you could take a boat ride on the canals, but there will always be something more compelling, between the screenings, the exhibits of experimental digital multiplatform projects at [DocLab](#), the panels and discussions, and the endless meet-and-greet parties.

Documentaries at their best act as catalysts to conversation, as doors that open up new curiosities, as urgent calls to alarm. And so they often

function as public media, connecting people through understanding of something worth knowing and sharing. Their subject matter can be trivial—for instance, the Pennebakers' latest *Kings of Pastry*. Or it can be profound—for instance, the subject of the top award-winner, *Last Train Home*, which shows the human experience of globalization and industrialization in the migrations of Chinese workers. Or the Special Jury Award-winning *The Most Dangerous Man in America*, about Daniel Ellsberg, the Defense Department analyst who leaked the “Pentagon Papers” to the media. (Both these titles, by the way, had funding from the public television production service [Independent Television Service](#). Look for *Last Train Home*, as well as *Good Fortune*, about the contradictions of development in Kenya, on [P.O.V.](#) The subject matter is only one aspect of their distinctive character. They are human-scale movies, often the voice of one person. They talk to us with the personality of their makers. They engage us gratefully as people willing to listen to and engage with them.

How does this kind of project translate into the ADHD online environment? If DocLab is any guide, with some difficulty. [Cat Cizek's Filmmaker-in-Residence project](#), sponsored by the Canadian National Film Board, is an exceptional example of an audio-visual project rooted in social relationships, and with interaction driven by those social relationships. Too many project leaders, though, presume that communities will gather around what often is fascinating material, but material that will surely languish without the social connections that the online environment demands.

Most of the films screening at IDFA were created out of a more old-fashioned, storytelling ethos, and for the more passive viewing experience of the film screening. I wonder how they will fare, in a Facebook world. Out of the hundreds of films available, I saw a handful, and was glad I did. I hope to find them later in theaters, on public TV's Independent Lens or P.O.V., on Netflix or online, and maybe I will. IDFA itself just launched an online TV channel where you can see some of the films from the fest.

One I loved was [Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia](#). *Indonesia Calling* is also the title of a 1946 film by Joris Ivens, the peripatetic Dutch filmmaker who as a fierce socialist made activist films in social struggles around the world. Ivens had been sent to Australia by the Dutch government to take part in the Dutch East Indies propaganda service,

which like the rest of the Dutch colonial apparatus was lodged in Australia during the Japanese occupation of what would become Indonesia. He was supposed to document, with Allied victory, the Dutch installation of a progressive regime transitioning to Indonesian independence. The Dutch were already backpedaling on their commitment, though, and Ivens' colleagues, with their Australian conservative allies, discredited this left-wing filmmaker. When Indonesian and Indian dockworkers discovered that they were loading munitions to arm a repressive returning Dutch regime that would suppress independence, they went on strike. Ivens, kept from resources and access by his conservative compatriots, quit his job and made a film about the strike.

Australian filmmaker John Hughes tells the improbable story of how Ivens made this 17-minute film, which became part of the Indonesian independence movement. (By the time a U.S.-backed coup brought in the vastly corrupt regime of Suharto, Ivens was off to other liberation struggles.) To do it, he ends up providing a mini-biography of Joris Ivens, a legend in his own country and to doc folk but unknown to many many more; a sketch of the geopolitics and independence history of the region; and a close-up study of how a film is made. All the stories are immensely worth knowing.

Ivens is a polarizing figure, because of his politics (sometimes Communist in the Russian style, sometimes Maoist in a Chinese mode). Hughes returns Ivens' complexity to him, without excusing or justifying any of his decisions. He shows how Ivens made the film, which was re-enactment—in this case, significantly after the fact. He notes the differences between how things happened and how Ivens restaged them. In one case, Ivens—with a skeleton cast, since most of the dockworkers had by that time left—re-enacts how a small flotilla of Indian dockworkers surrounded a departing strike-breaking ship and convinced them, shouting urgently in a variety of Indian languages, to stop working; the ship turned around. In the reenactment, it's one boat, with a couple of non-Indians speaking English. It's simpler than the reality, easier to understand, and incidentally more in accord with our notion of individual heroics, as well as being a pragmatic choice. It's just not faithful to the way things happened.

And then Hughes locates the drama that Ivens caught within the wider one. He reveals the internal, red-baiting politics (aided by J. Edgar Hoover,

whose FBI was spying on Ivens while he was in the U.S.), which only got worse and affected the lives of everyone who worked with Ivens. He showcases the unsuspected courage of the Australian government in backing the Indonesian independence struggle against the interests of Australia's traditional allies, the English, Americans and Dutch. He shows how the film was used, and why people in Indonesia thought it was so important. At the end, you also know that the filmmaker himself is an artist committed to making media that matters, and sophisticated in weighing the consequences of storytelling choices.

When I asked him why he made the film he said, "I really made it for a new generation of Australian filmmakers. I wanted them to see what was at stake for Ivens when he made this film, and what kind of difference it made. And I wanted them to see that government agencies can subvert as well as support filmmaking." Hughes does indeed restore memory, but it's not just for Australian filmmakers. This is also a story with global links. It recalls the intensely political moment of transition from colonial status to independence, in a Cold War context. It is a story about institutional politics, familiar to anyone who's ever been institutionalized. And it's a story about storytelling that matters. I hope *Indonesia Calling* gets distribution everywhere documentary history is told. Hughes tells me he'll be [self-distributing](#) an NTSC version shortly.

For those interested in the realities of Australia and Southeast Asia, it was a rich fest overall. One treasure was the 1995 classic *Contact* retells a gripping story of contacting a remote group of Australian aboriginals, using remarkable footage from the 1960s moment and re-enactments done in high humor by the aboriginals themselves. *Strange Birds in Paradise* is a homely and uneven work with a compelling story, about the persecution of the inhabitants of West Papua/Irian Jaya by the Indonesian armed forces—whose officers also hold concessions for the area's many natural resources. The Papuans want independence, and the Indonesians want their stuff.

Another extraordinary viewing experience was Eyal Sivan's *Jaffa: The Orange's Clockwork*. Sivan is an Israeli-born filmmaker and academic, who produces intensely thoughtful works. Like the title, the film might be just a little too arch, but it's an energizing experience at every level—political, aesthetic, intellectual. The film explores the meanings given to the Jaffa

orange, as Israel developed. Once the product of an Arab seaside town—Jaffa, the orange became a symbol of the energetic young Israeli state, which struggled to erase the memory of the Jaffa that was destroyed in 1948 and engulfed by Tel Aviv. The orange later became an image widely used by protesters of Israeli treatment of Palestinians (for instance, an orange as a grenade). Sivan asks viewers to look carefully and critically at propaganda film, advertisements, posters and branding images, probe their meaning and—with the help of Palestinian, Israeli and international scholars—grasp the political context. I hope *Jaffa* gets a vigorous world-wide circulation. It would be a boon to media literacy everywhere, as well as a productive jog to better conversations about Middle East politics.

One of IDFA's delights is its welcoming of retrospective. IDFA invites its selected filmmaker to choose ten favorites. Eyal Sivan selected among others a 1976 Godard film, *Ici et Ailleurs*. In it, Godard offers a pitiless critique of an earlier film of his, a triumphalist propaganda film in support of Palestinians. It was a healthy reminder that Godard in a self-critique is fully as annoying as Godard in full-on propaganda mode. (*Mother Dao*, which I loved, was another of Sivan's choices, so Sivan's choices balanced out for me.)

Documentarians always complain about two things: lack of money, and lack of distribution for their work. At IDFA, both complaints were loud. Financing has become even harder with the recession. National public broadcasters are often both taking funding cuts and also sharpening the commercial edge of their appeal. The money's in high-drama reality shows, not in slow-foodish documentaries. All over Europe and the wealthier Commonwealth countries, documentary filmmakers have since the dawn of documentary depended upon their governments—often chafing about governmental restrictions and demands, but nonetheless dependent. The harshly entrepreneurial environment in which U.S. filmmakers live is something Europeans are still getting used to. Nonprofit partners don't make up the difference (the U.S. tax laws enabling the existence of foundations is not common), and using social media techniques to build and groom a social and financing network for your film is largely unproven. The transition is daunting to many. Online distribution, while growing, doesn't provide an adequate funding stream.

The challenges of funding inevitably bring filmmakers back to the question of constructing networks of support, communities, constituencies. And that brings them back to the question of how to use the latest tools of social media to find, engage and activate the people they want to become members of the public about the issues they so passionately investigate. #