

Bath Film Festival 2008 Thursday 30th October

OF TIME AND THE CITY

United Kingdom | 2008 | 72m

Director: Terence Davies

Narration: Terence Davies

Cinematography: Tim Pollard

Editing: Liza Ryan-Carter

Music: Various, including Franz Liszt, Gustav Mahler, Peggy Lee, The Hollies, Gabriel Fauré

Recently an e-mail landed in my inbox advertising an 'unscripted' reality TV show. Therein lies the dilemma of the documentary, a form so deconstructed in recent years it probably needs a new name.

Innovations in the depiction of 'real life' did not start with *Big Brother*, let alone the orchestrated, self-reflexive documentaries of Errol Morris. Think back to the surrealism of Jean Vigo's *À Propos de Nice* or the problematic aesthetics of Leni Riefenstahl. In the UK, under documentary pioneer John Grierson, the public information film was already edging towards abstraction with *Night Mail* in 1936, its locomotive rhythms aided by the verses of W H Auden and the music of Benjamin Britten.

Which brings us to *Of Time and the City*, the first documentary by the maverick and, of late, neglected British director Terence Davies. Here again the form is used for a highly subjective and allusive re-arrangement of found material, one that makes the film very much a companion piece to Davies' fictional work. While films such as *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* were rooted in often brutal particulars, Davies always leant more towards the lyricism and formal audacity of Michael Powell than the relatively unvarnished realism of Ken Loach.

All of these facets are present and correct in *Of Time and the City*, an ambivalent love-letter to Liverpool filtered through Davies' personal history and sensibility. Working largely with archive footage, the director finds suggestive juxtapositions of sound and image that make for a resolutely cinematic experience.

The film is also unabashedly literary. In the opening minutes, Davies hits us with A E Housman (cueing his themes of memory and regret: "The happy highways where I went/And cannot come again") and P B Shelley, while his trademark slow pans drink in the stately architecture.

Here are the ships, docks and swimming pools; Kenneth Williams camping it up on *Round The Horne*; the roar of The Kop before football got greedy. And here is the young Davies, gorging on movies and wrestling matches – the latter stirring unexpected desires and an early wrestle with Catholic guilt.

Throughout, the director's commentary – sonorous, ironic, tender and sometimes downright acerbic (the Beatles dismissed as “more like a firm of provincial solicitors”) – throws the images into comic or emotional relief. The soundtrack, ranging from the Spinners to Mahler, the Hollies to Handel, rubs up against the images in ways that are sometimes heartfelt, sometimes satirical, sometimes both at once.

While Big Events such as the Korean War and the Coronation (Davies lavishing scorn) come and go, the film's gaze never wanders far from the poor and marginalised, in whose stoicism this born-again atheist finds a kind of grace. As Peggy Lee croons *The Folks Who Live on the Hill*, though, the slums where housewives and the unemployed once chatted on their doorsteps are flattened in favour of utilitarian tower blocks. “We had hoped for paradise. We got the anus mundi,” Davies intones lugubriously.

Inevitably this vision is a narrow one. There is almost no acknowledgment of the ethnic mix that makes Liverpool ‘the world in one city’, its political militancy, the forces that hastened its economic decline or its more recent regeneration. Yet Davies' preoccupation with his own sense of loss gives the film a unique tang.

Now he feels an “alien in my own land”, time and death heaped up around him. But Davies gives us a final visual and aural flourish as romantic as the opening sequence of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*. What remains is a dream city, still magnificent amid its ruin, and always looking out to sea.

BFF film note by Peter Mansell

The screening will be followed by a nationwide satellite-transmitted Q+A with the director Terence Davies presented by City Screen. This screening is jointly promoted by City Screen and the Bath Film Festival, made possible through the collaboration of the British Film Institute and the UK Film Council.