

Abu Dhabi Film Festival - 3D Glasses and Talking Cows: Documentaries Get Serious About Their Options

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Still from 'Iraqi Odyssey' directed by Samir

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Within the ongoing big bang in documentary culture, as audiences grow and the non-fiction film diversifies across an array of media platforms, it is notable that documentary filmmakers are increasingly experimenting with cinematic technologies and surprisingly playful aesthetics that would seem to belong to other genres. Two documentaries at this year's Festival, Samir's *Iraqi Odyssey* and Amer Shomali and Paul Cowan's *The Wanted 18*, present precisely this inclination, the former filmed in 3D and the latter drawing upon the somewhat nostalgic aesthetic of stop-motion animation.

In *Iraqi Odyssey*, Iraqi expatriate documentarian Samir (known on the festival circuit for his many previous films including *Forget Baghdad*) offers an epic examination of his family tree, charting the worldwide migrations of his relatives over several decades. The film at first risks overwhelming with details, as viewers are quickly introduced to Samir's extended family through a series of elaborate genealogical graphics. But as he focuses in on five relatives (a handful of individuals out of the

estimated four or five million Iraqis living abroad), their lively interviews quickly draw us into the conversation. The film also mobilizes rare material culled from archives in Iraq, Russia, the UK, France and the US, charting Iraq's modern history while shining a personal light on an often misrepresented nation. We learn of Samir's relatives' roles in the push to build a modern democratic society following independence in the 1950s, and the dashing of those same dreams during the series of coups and counter-coups that ushered in Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.

While donning plastic 3D glasses usually accompanies a Hollywood blockbuster, the format choice here quickly proves a fitting match to the film: a vastly personal consideration of exile and the cruel turns of political fate. Samir's interest in using 3D technologies continues his project (begun with his video installation work and digital documentaries like *Babylon 2*) of finding visual correlatives to how people speak — making allusions, having thoughts in the back of their minds — creating a multilayered and deeply textured space that embodies the way one talks about their own memories. Exploring the contemporary 3D image, Samir realized he could situate his interview subjects in the foreground while text, archival footage and images materialize in the background, an effect he feels is more "reminiscent of a stereoscopic image from the 19th century" than 21st century action films. Viewers begin to imagine themselves in the presence of the individuals, experiencing their jokes, regrets and wistful remembrances firsthand. The technique makes us each a witness to history, both personal and national. While decades of Iraqi history culminate in Samir's many questions about the future of the country, left once again uncertain in the wake of the American invasion and renewed sectarian violence, one comes to share the filmmaker's nostalgia for a homeland that is forever changed.

While *Iraqi Odyssey* employs 3D technology to give viewers an immersive experience of the history it recounts, *The Wanted 18* takes an even more surprising aesthetic approach in its use of stop-motion animation combined with comic book sequences and reenactments. The film documents the story of the "Intifada milk": in 1988, during the First Intifada, a group from the Palestinian town of Beit Sahour purchased 18 milk cows from a kibbutz. Beit Sahour was dependent upon milk purchased from Israel and the village collective was eager for one small avenue of independence. But when authorities learned about the herd, they went to shocking lengths to find them and defeat this "threat to the national security of the state of Israel."

Few filmmakers approach the documentary form with aesthetics that could be deemed overtly whimsical; certainly no others (to my knowledge) have tackled the turbulent issue of Israel-Palestine relations through charmingly animated cows. (The

cows are, in fact, given names, sassy dialogue and distinct personalities. One could *almost* imagine them getting collectible toys like characters from a Disney film.) And yet the approach has multiple strengths. Shomali suggests there is something unexpectedly real and sympathetic about the texture of stop-motion animation, and that it is “easier to blend those realities between stop-motion and interviews and actors.” It also certainly opens the film up to a broader audience, offering a frequently humorous and accessible window onto a conflict that, of logical necessity, is so often approached with deadly seriousness. But there is a subtler project at work here than one of accessibility. The historical chapter that the film relates is so full of patent absurdity and surreal moments that the denaturalized aesthetic ultimately lambasts the behaviour of the Israeli authority for making a ludicrous crisis out of a herd of 18 cows.

No less of an expert than Errol Morris has said “there is no rule about how a documentary film has to be made... try to tell a story about the real world, but how you go about it, to me, is up for grabs.” This spirit of newly open frontiers, particularly as it relates to cinematographic technologies and aesthetics, enables filmmakers like Samir, Shomali and Cowan to experiment with new ways of bringing their stories to their viewers but also the reverse: of transporting their viewers into their stories.

Iraqi Odyssey : Mon 10/27/2014 20:45 Vox 2
Thu 10/ 0/2014 20:30 Vox 1

<http://www.abudhabifilmfestival.ae/en/festival/adff-2014/10-26-3D-Glasses-and-Talking-Cows-The-Wanted-18-and-Iraqi-Odyssey>