

C. CLAIRE THOMSON:

Short Films From a Small Nation. Danish Informational Cinema 1935-1965.

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Let me say this from the beginning: it is an extremely well-written and analytically rich book Claire Thomson has produced about the formative years of Danish documentary films between 1935 and 1965. Her strategy is first to draw up the national and international contours of the genre, which she somewhat strangely chooses to call 'useful cinema' instead of just documentary films. In fact however she uses the term documentary just as often. She also contextualizes her study using the small nation paradigm, and in doing so she underlines what for instance Andrew Higson and Mette Hjort have pointed out: cinema is a potent way of communicating images of small nations, of offering ways of imagining national communities. In her many examples she

demonstrates that such images are often complex and also show conflicts within a national community.

The films she deals with in the book were the result of a public and private intervention in favour of making films about all aspects of Danish life, culture and society. Short films like these were often shown in cinemas but just as often in other contexts like schools, and as it turns out, the films also had a wide international circulation. Claire Thomson is also inspired by actor-network theory, and she looks at film production as 'a condensed bit of a network' (p. 37). This approach, which could also be called a creative media industries approach, turns out to be very useful as she describes and analyses the institutional framework behind the films – and not least in her detailed analysis of the examples she takes up. In those cases she builds on rich archival material from the Danish Film Institute and is able to follow the film from idea to finished product and reception.

The book as a whole is excellent and well-researched, but no doubt the best sections are the ones where she focuses on specific and central films. This also makes it possible to see in detail the tension potentially arising from the fact that these films are all commissioned. They are not the works of an independent director, as they have to be of use as part of a special communication assignment. Thomson includes an interesting discussion of the art film vs. the art of documentary (ch. 8). This is a conflict we can find in the whole of the early documentary movement, and where people like the UK documentary pioneer John Grierson and his Danish equivalent Theodor Christensen have both argued that aesthetic freedom and the ability to dramatize reality are crucial for a documentary film to seize the attention of an audience.

The particular films Thomson studies illustrate this. In chapter 6 she analyses the so-called Marshall films made after the war, films made possible by American funding, and films that often show the conflicting process of trying to balance between an agenda of factual information and usefulness and the creative interest in making films with a difference. Examples of how creative such films can be are provided by Ingolf Boisen's *They Guide you Across* (1949) about transatlantic flights and by Theodor Christensen's *All my Ships* (1951), about the Danish ship-builder Burmeister & Wain. In this film a fairy-tale figure

(the little mermaid) meets a specific character, the shipbuilder Helge Jensen.

Theodor Christensen is obviously central in the book, both as an unofficial public spokesman and as a reflective theoretician, strongly inspired by the Grierson tradition in the UK. But also the documentary films by Carl Th. Dreyer, for instance *Thorvaldsen* (1949), and Hagen Hasselbalch's rich production, especially the international success *Shaped by Danish Hands* (1948) are analysed in detail by Thomson. Jørgen Roos, one of the most productive and versatile Danish documentary directors of all time, is also given a prominent place in the book. His ironic, aesthetically very experimental *A City Called Copenhagen* (1960) is analysed in a whole chapter of its own. This twenty-minute film is one of the most successful Danish postwar documentaries, and the first to be nominated for an Oscar. The analysis by Thomson looks in depth at both how it was made and how it was received. It is a brilliant analysis which also serves as a meeting point between the older forms of documentary in the book and the new times to come, times in which Danish documentaries were given more 'constitutional' freedom by the new film laws of the 1960s and 70s.

As I stated at the beginning, this is an excellent book, a must-read for all those interested in documentaries and small nation cinema. I am not at all convinced that the term 'useful cinema' is in itself a useful term. What then would un-useful cinema be? It doesn't really make sense, and certainly the term documentary and the theories connected with that are much more useful in my opinion. But apart from that – read this book!

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