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- OFFERS
- NOTICES
- PODCASTS
- RRTV

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DOCUMENTARY FILM & THE CURSE OF LIVING IN INTERESTING TIMES: INTERVIEW WITH TREASA O'BRIEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF OPEN CITY DOCS FEST

 Bojana Jankovic on 09/06/14 with comments

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Curated in seven thematic strands, including [Cinemadoosti: Documenting Iran](#), [City Stories](#) and [Science Friction](#), as well as one dedicated to Israeli filmmaker [Avi Mograbi](#), the [Open City](#)

Docs Fest doesn't waste any time in pointing out just how abundant the realm of documentary film is. Rather than overwhelming with choice however, the festival works hard to turn the audience into a community: every screening is transformed into a live event and there are also **masterclasses, networking and panel events** for that essential insider knowledge. In short: Open City Docs Fest is not about sparking or re-igniting your interest in documentaries – it's about plunging you head first into the world of professionals and aficionados alike.

The festival's Executive Director Treasa O'Brien, a filmmaker herself, sees documentary film as a catalyst for activism and is eager to find ways to provoke conversations amongst the audience. She talked to Run Riot about where the genre is in the UK, the power of live audience and how to turn a Saturday into a veritable docu-fest.

Run Riot: What's the current position of documentary films and filmmakers based in the UK? Are there sufficient time, space and resources devoted to it?

Treasa O'Brien: *May you live in interesting times* is a Chinese curse and I certainly think we are. Our generation is seeing so many rights stripped away as we bulldoze 'forward' with neoliberal agendas that have doubled university fees, invented the precariat workforce and a consumer and surveillance society that stretches beyond Orwell's dystopian vision. The state is closing the door on new migrants and operating the unethical 'stop and search' for people living here. The UK was a place where racism and sexism were fought against and now seem to be creeping back with the rise of nationalism, as recent elections have underlined.

For documentary makers, there are more opportunities for their work to be seen outside of TV, as social screenings, the web, festivals and cinema takes an unprecedented interest in the documentary film. However, TV still has a parochial vision of documentary – still sending 'our man from home' to present programmes from a British perspective and reluctant to commission or show indigenous films or films that are directly political. Meanwhile, the ideology of capitalism permeates 'factual entertainment' that is derivative, mindless and patronising at best, and at worst, insulting and ideologically right-wing programmes are commissioned that demonise people on welfare or laud the work of immigration police, using television as a tool for blatant government propaganda.

Documentary makers do have the means to make independent films, although without being paid, it means a hand-to mouth life, or a class of filmmakers that come from privileged backgrounds where their parents continue to support them while they make films, leaving out the voices of those who might have something new to say. To be honest, I don't see a new movement of documentary film in the UK at the moment, but I am still an idealist and I hope that Open City Docs Fest can help to stimulate something! There is much more interesting work coming from India, Brazil, Iran, Denmark, Italy at the moment. I think the UK suffers from the legacy of its once avant-garde TV culture, and has not yet re-invented itself. Its cultural history is literature and theatre, which makes their cinema too literal. Ireland, where I am from, has a similar issue with cinema; it too has a literature and musical heritage and cinematic language has not grown organically nor indigenously from there.

The onus now is on filmmakers to be creative rather than trying to respond to a market, it's on commissioners to be brave about new talent and also on audiences to seek out and support it. Society makes its own culture(s) – we should not allow culture to become a commodity that we buy. It is alive, it is growing, mutating and changing all the time, and we feed it as much as we eat it!

Run Riot: Can you tell us about your work with the Open City Docs Fest? What were your ideas for the festival coming in, and where do you hope to see it go in the future?

Treasa O'Brien: Open City Docs Fest is London's global documentary festival. We are an audience-facing festival and pride ourselves on the breadth and depth of engagement we provide for filmmakers to meet their audiences and vice versa. We are trying to stimulate cultural and political engagement and active citizenship for audiences as much as filmmakers. When I joined the festival 3 years ago, I had the vision of a 'live' festival, of creating a space in the middle of London for a community to come together, for people to be active participants in the festival and create new conversations stimulated by the films and atmosphere. The most influential films for me are ones I've seen with an audience present – cinema for me is a shared collective experience.

Plans for the future are to commission more live interactive events, expanding ideas of what documentary can be and how it can be experienced. We've introduced a new development fund that matches researchers and filmmakers called Border Crossings – the winning team will show their work-in-progress at the 2015 festival.

And we want to build on the cinematic tours (like those that we created in 2013) and make the city a living documentary playground to interact with.

Run Riot: The festival condenses an abundance of films into five days and nine strands dedicated to topics as diverse as the perils of digital existence, corporate and state mechanisms and Iranian cinephilia. How did you decide which topics to devote parts of the festival to? Is there a loose curatorial narrative that brings together all the films in the programme?

Treasa O'Brien: The festival programmes films from all over the world and we show films that might not normally get seen in London. We are a small team, and the film programme is decided by Michael Stewart, founding director, Oliver Wright, programme manager and myself, along with input and advice from others. The idea of stranding films or arranging them in themes is partly planned and partly organic, responding to what we see that year and what comes to us. [The Digital Natives](#) strand came about due to a zeitgeist of films being made in that subject this year that Oliver Wright recognised, and [Cinemadoosti](#): Documenting Iran came about as a result of a visit I made to the Cinema Verite documentary festival in Tehran last December.

In Iran, I met many filmmakers and realised how many limitations there are for them to make documentaries; I was enthralled by their resilience and inventiveness; some make films by adhering to or getting around the red lines of censorship; others make them underground and they only get shown outside the country. Last year a relatively more liberal new president, Rohani, was elected and there is a sense of hope that the country is opening up and such laws are being relaxed, so it is a very interesting time for Iranian filmmakers. The films in the Cinemadoosti strand challenge stereotypical representations and offer London audiences the chance to see new perspectives on life in Iran. The idea of cinemadoosti (Persian for cinephilia), is explored by several of the films, showing Iranian life through the prism of the love of cinema that permeates Iranian culture.

Run Riot: Open City Docs Fest puts great emphasis on both form and content – which films in the festival stand out in terms of pushing the formal boundaries of documentary filmmaking?

Treasa O'Brien: We are constantly searching for new forms in documentary. The term itself is still greatly contested and slips away from easy definitions. In 2012, we had a retrospective programme of artist's moving image work, and in 2013, we had a strand called Hybrid Forms, which explored films that traversed the boundaries of documentary and fiction. This year, we are exploring new forms with the [special programme of shorts from the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab](#), and also the feature [Manakamana](#). Our [Popathon](#) event explores hacking, and web-based documentary made collectively, and a highlight special event is [The Details](#) in the Bloomsbury Theatre on Fri 20 June. For this, our special guest Avi Mograbi will present a 4-channel live screening of his own films, with his long-time collaborator and composer Noam Enbar and band performing a live score.

Run Riot: A whole section of the festival is dedicated to Avi Mograbi, an artist whose work is devoted to exploring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What's distinct about his approach to documentary filmmaking?

Treasa O'Brien: What is distinct about Avi Mograbi is that he manages to be complex without being complicated. He is a performative filmmaker who troubles his own position as a director. His films begin with telling you what they are about and then unravel themselves rather than construct themselves. Mograbi's oeuvre is controversial in Israel; although he is left-wing he does not allow himself to sit comfortably in this position and probes the psyche of that culture. In his new film, [Once I Entered a Garden](#), he takes a trip to a graveyard with his Arabic Teacher, a Palestinian married to an Israeli, and includes his precocious daughter in the journey. The film seems simple, even mundane at times, but it operates on the conscience of how the present is spirited with the past but the future is not inevitable. Mograbi will be present at all his films for Q&As as well as doing a special masterclass.

Run Riot: Would you consider documentary filmmaking a kind of activism? How has all the widely available technology (from smartphones to basic editing software) influenced the genre?

Treasa O'Brien: I think documentary can be a catalyst for activism rather than being activism itself. It depends on the audience as much as the filmmaker to create change – a film can only be a tool that people can use. I believe that documentary, or art in general, can contribute to changing consciousness, which is essential to happen in tandem and in dialogue with becoming engaged in activism and protest.

As for technology making filmmaking more accessible, of course it's great that the means of production is more evenly distributed. However, it's like being literate and having a pen, it's revolutionary! But it doesn't make you a good writer. So we still need filmmakers and storytellers even if everyone has a camera phone.

Run Riot: The festival makes a point of turning every screening into a live event, with talks, panels, meals and music framing the films. Why is this important to you?

Treasa O'Brien: My passion for programming stems from a belief in the power of live audiences, and how that coming together can catalyse people and engage them with one another as well as with the film. No film can exist without an audience, and it is in the collective memory that cinema truly lives. So we try to create and expand the idea of a film screening into a film and documentary culture.

I introduced the Cinema Tent on Torrington Square, a popup venue by the Lost Pictureshow that gives the festival a music festival and a village fete feeling! Last year we extended the area around it into the Open City Village with a bar, café and food vendors and this year we will have live acoustic sets happening in between films and DJs and parties at night. The Tent is very accessible and becomes a social space as well as a cinema, where festival folk meet and curious passers-by are drawn in and welcomed.

Run Riot: Open City Docs works from UCL and has a strong connection to budding and emerging filmmakers. What events, talks and master classes are programmed with this audience in mind?

Treasa O'Brien: We see ourselves as nurturing the next generation of filmmakers. Our opening night film is a [first feature by a British director, Ed Owles](#). We also award prizes for best British Film and Best Emerging International Filmmaker, and of course our [Mystreet project](#) and special screening rewards and encourages emerging talent. Panel discussions, workshops and Q&As after the films with researchers in the field allow for greater participation from the audience to engage with the films and their subject matters. We have a ["Meet the Filmmakers"](#) session, and an event with Iranian filmmakers called [Celluloid Underground](#). We encourage audiences to make journeys through the programme by following a strand. This year, we have strand hosts who animate the engagement between filmmakers and audience by hosting informal meetings to discuss the ideas in the strand.

Run Riot: Could you plan out a day at the festival as a taster for our readers?

Treasa O'Brien: Saturday 21 June.

Arrive at midday and choose between two free events: The [MyStreet](#) film screenings or a networking brunch at the Open City Village. At 2pm go see [Jerry & Me](#) and [Iranian Ninja](#) at the Cinema Tent and meet one of the filmmakers Mehrnaz Saeedvafa. At 4pm, [meet all the Iranian filmmakers](#) + special guests in Studio 2 above the Hub space for a discussion on making films in Iran, and join them all for a drink in the OCDF bar afterwards while listening to one of the acoustic sets by Green Door. At 6pm go see [Once I Entered a Garden](#), Avi Mograbi's new film and ask him about in the Q&A. At 7.30 go see [Sepideh](#), a film about an Iranian teenager who wants to be an astronaut in the beautiful Bloomsbury Theatre or watch [Demonstration](#), a film ballet about protest, in the Cinema Tent. And at the ICA there's [Manakamana](#) for those who'd like to take a slower pace. End your day at the free [Iranian Nights](#) party in the Open City Village, eating delicious Persian food and listening to the live concert by Pouya Mahmoodi, playing sitar. Then dance under the stars of midsummer 'til midnight with Persian pop DJ XENRES. See you there!

Open City Docs Fest

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