

A Listening Eye: The Films of Mike Dibb
Part Three: Conversation Pieces

Week Two

Available to view 5 - 11 March 2021

For the ninth week of *A Listening Eye*, as we move further into the final phase of Mike Dibb's series, we focus on his dynamic films about and with writers, thinkers, activists and public intellectuals, as well as an artist or two. This programme continues to demonstrate the sheer range of engaged lives and ideas that Dibb has documented.

Available to view 5 - 11 March:

The Further Adventures of Don Quixote, 1995, 50'

The Beginning of the End of the Affair, 1999, 50'

Memories of the Future, John Ruskin and William Morris 1984, 2x52'

A Curious Mind – AS Byatt, 1996, 50'

Somewhere Over the Rainbow, 1982, 50'

Steven Rose – A Profile 2003, 30'

The Spirit of Lorca, 1986, 75'

The Fame and Shame of Salvador Dali, 1997-98, 120'

The Further Adventures of Don Quixote (Bookmark)

As early as chapter two in this astonishingly original and prescient novel, Miguel de Cervantes was already aware of his hero's impending immortality:

"Happy shall be the times and happy shall be the age, in which my famous deeds shall come to light; deeds worthy to be engraved in bronze, carved in marble, and re-created in painting, as a monument to posterity!"

Cervantes' clairvoyance didn't quite stretch to the arrival of cinema and television; but I'm sure that, if he had known about them, he would have guessed that a film about Don Quixote and Sancho Panza's astonishing after-life would eventually be made. He just didn't know when...but then neither did I!

Way back in 1967 I was a BBC film editor, applying for a job as a documentary director in the Music and Arts department. During one interview I was asked what kind of a film I'd like to make. Among other things I suggested one exploring the ways in which the world's most famous novel had been so re-worked and interpreted over the years that its two central characters had now become much more familiar as images in paintings, music, ballet, movies and popular art,

than as first described in Cervantes' original text; and maybe, I added, this process was turning this hugely influential novel into one of the most translated but least read books in the world?

The idea seemed to go down OK, in so far that I got the job. I didn't however get to make the film...until that is about 35 years later when it was commissioned for BBC2's "Bookmark" series.

At last I was able to set off on my own quixotic journey of discovery, following what is now a popular sign-posted route across La Mancha, filming chance encounters along the way with many diverse people, from students and tourists to craftsmen and musicians. Elsewhere I visited a Mexican museum exclusively devoted to images of DQ and met a Spanish novelist who lived in a house where scenes from the novel were inscribed on the tiles of her floor. I also had very interesting conversations about fantasy and reality with other well-known writers, including Carlos Fuentes, Ben Okri and AS Byatt, whose perceptive insights and observations all found their place in the tapestry of the film as a whole.

THE QUIXOTIC THOUGHTS OF AN INDEPENDENT FILM-MAKER

by Mike Dibb

This article appeared in the Independent Producers' journal PACT, to coincide with the transmission on Saturday March 25th 1994 of The Further Adventures of Don Quixote.

To the Duke of Bejar (henceforth to be known as The Commissioning Editor for This, That or the Other):

"Trusting in the favourable reception and honour your excellency accords to all kinds of books (henceforth to be known as TV programme proposals), and as a prince well disposed towards the liberal arts, especially those which have nobility and are not reduced to the service and profit of the vulgar, I have decided to publish "The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha" (henceforth to be known as "The Further Adventures of Don Quixote") under the shadow of your excellency's most illustrious name. I trust you will not disdain the poverty of so humble an offering"

- Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (henceforth to be known as Miguel de Londres Dibb)

Once upon a time I was complacent enough to mock Cervantes' ingratiating self-abasement to his patron. Not any more. We independent filmmakers are now well attuned to self-abasement. Day after day we send off our programme proposals, anticipating the dull thud of indifference as they flop on to the desks of commissioning editors. And each of our accompanying letters uncomfortably echoes the tone of Cervantes' humble offering.

The truth is that Cervantes, as with so much in his astonishingly prescient novel, knew what was coming and got it right. He even foresaw Don Quixote's own cultural after-life. As early as Chapter Two of this very long novel his hero was already aware of impending immortality: *"Happy shall be the times and happy shall be the age, in which my famous deeds shall come to light; deeds worthy to be engraved in bronze, carved in marble, and re-created in painting, as a monument to posterity!"*. Cervantes' clairvoyance didn't

quite stretch to the invention of film and television; but I'm sure that, if he had known about them, he would have guessed that a programme about his two great literary characters would happen sometime. He just didn't know when, but then neither did I.

Way back in the 1960's I was a film editor, applying for a job as a director in the Music and Arts department of the BBC. During one of my interviews I was asked what kind of a film I would like to make. Among other things I suggested a documentary exploring the ways in which the novel of Don Quixote had been reinterpreted over the years, to the point where it was more familiar to people from paintings, music, ballet and cinema than from a reading of Cervantes' original text; and maybe, I said, this process was turning it into the most famous least-read book in the world. The idea seemed to go down OK, in so far that I got the job. I didn't however get to make the film; which is why the synopsis I gave to the present editor of Bookmark was dated Oct 1967.

At the top of this synopsis Humphrey Burton, then Head of Dept, had scribbled in red ink, "We must get Orson Welles as narrator..." And I vividly remember meeting and talking with Orson Welles in Soho Square about his own 'home movie', which he was trying to complete at the time. Of course he never did finish it but, in a way that I never anticipated but now feels appropriate, the film I've finally made begins with Welles' familiar voice and a short sequence from the highly personal and idiosyncratic movie which has now been reconstituted from the un-cut bits of film he left behind. In fact Orson Welles heads a distinguished list of directors who have tried and so far failed to get films based on Don Quixote off the ground; back in the 70's Sir Peter Hall had a go, today John Boorman and Terry Gilliam are still trying, and this is just in the UK; which makes it rather surprising that the earliest feature film I found in the BFI archive was British, a silent movie, inventively directed by Maurice Elvey in 1923. George Robey, the music hall artiste, played the part of Sancho and the action takes place in a landscape that looks very like the Lake District. Ten years later Robey played the part again, this time singing, in a film directed by G W Pabst that also featured the Russian bass Chaliapin as DQ.

In fact the Russians have always taken to the novel; they go for its melancholy. Dostoevsky wrote one of the best essays about it, quoted admiringly by the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes in his eloquent contribution to my film "It proves that in fiction truth is saved by a lie", said Dostoevsky, a useful point of departure for the film director Grigori Kozintsev, when he set out to make his version in the political climate of the Soviet Union in 1957. For him (as indeed for Cervantes himself) Don Quixote was an appropriately ambiguous metaphor through which to speak. As the old knight galloped off to challenge the windmills, his words and actions could be interpreted, either (by those in authority) as the embodiment of the idealism of the Communist State, or (by dissidents) as the heroic individual challenging the state's centralised power.

In fact this most famous of Don Quixote's adventures takes up barely two pages in a novel of almost a thousand. But it is the image that has stuck and, needless to say, there isn't a movie that doesn't include it and the phrase 'tilting at windmills' has entered the language, indeed has become the familiar image for all those who feel they know the book without having read it. It certainly describes much of the life of the so-called

'independent' filmmaker, (maybe our trade association PACT should be re-named PAQT, and re-launched as the Producers Association of Quixotic Traders?).

Centralised bureaucratic power also seems to ring a few bells... when, wherever you look in our industry (in fact wherever you look), more and more decisions are taken by fewer and fewer people. Needless to say Cervantes had something to say about this too~ in the warning given to Quixote's loyal side-kick Sancho Panza, before he goes off to govern the island of Barataria : *"If once you taste power, Sancho, you will lick your fingers for it, so very sweet is it to command, and be obeyed."* I'm sure we could all think of people above whose door, we would like to nail that sentence! But, of course, we don't; and too often in fact we don't say anything, or rarely quite what we mean. Like Cervantes, though without the complications of dealing with the Inquisition, we comment obliquely on the powers above, preferring to bite our lips rather than the hands of those that feed us (or not, as is more normally the case).

For Cervantes irony and humour were his most potent weapons. Indeed irony touches every aspect of his own quixotic enterprise, from its conception in his mind, to its promiscuous after-life in the imagination of others. Cervantes first sat down to write a short satire on the novels of chivalry so popular at the time; what he actually created was an extremely long, sad and funny treatise on the nature of reality and illusion. Don Quixote looked back to books from the past, but his fictional life is still the most modern of novels. He never existed, yet today he and Sancho seem more real than any other Spaniards in history. Dulcinea lived only in Don Quixote's mind, yet today you can visit her house in the town of El Toboso. Don Quixote is a story about a failure but the book itself was an instant success. Both Don Quixote and his alter ego Don Juan, (created just 30 years later), are quintessentially Spanish, yet they touch a universal nerve. Cervantes wrote other 'more serious' works by which he thought he would be better remembered, but today Don Quixote is the only one of his books that everyone knows.

The novel is a triumph of profundity masquerading as folly. It is a wonderful testament to the unexpected; the novel's success surprised the author as much as the world. Yet again, there is a lesson for us today, as success in our multi media world is market researched, analysed, quantified and re-packaged (quite often, of course, without success). Don Quixote testifies to the power of the playful imagination, which becomes real in the act of making something new, where the most interesting things are often discovered by chance, and where the best of what is possible only happens because it is unpredictable.

For me as for many others, the greatest sections of the novel are in Part 2 (rather a pity, because many readers don't get that far). Cervantes began writing it because the first part was so successful. It also allowed him to take ironic revenge on another obscure writer, who had plagiarised him and published an alternative part two under the pseudonym of Avellaneda. So, in Cervantes' own second part, Sancho and the Sad Knight become aware that accounts of their lives have already been printed; they keep meeting people who actually know about their exploits; indeed they are more 'real', both for themselves and others, because their lives have been written and read. It is an astonishing moment in the history of literature. Cervantes has given birth to the first

major modern novel and, at the same time, discovered post-modernism a few hundred years before anyone gave it a name!

And one last thing, he did all this when he was over 50, after a hard impoverished life, much of it spent earning a pittance as a travelling tax collector. I heard recently that 90% of the BBC are now under 50. If so I take comfort in Cervantes' age, and in the fact that Velazquez was in his 50's when he painted Las Meninas, and that most of Goya's greatest work was produced between 1796 and 1828, when he died aged 82. And finally, to keep it just to Spain, that Luis Bunuel was over 60 when he started directing his last memorable sequence of films. It's important for us 'oldies' to remember this.

The Beginning of The End of The Affair

A fascinating film about Graham Greene, in which Oliver Walston investigates his mother Catherine's intriguing and unusual 20 year long relationship with the writer, which first gave rise to Greene's famous novel *The End of The Affair*, and was subsequently turned into two feature films, the second of which we follow as it is being filmed. Written and directed by Neil Jordan, it features Ralph Fiennes and Julianne Moore, all three of whom offer interesting and personal perspectives on the novel's continuing resonance. During the documentary Oliver also compares notes about his mother's notorious affair with other (often disapproving) members of his family and we see the many photos of Graham and Catherine preserved in the family album in Thriplow, near Cambridge, where Oliver still lives. We also visit the couples' two main 'love-nests', in Achill, off the coast of Ireland and in Capri, off the coast of Italy, where Oliver meets the delightfully articulate US novelist Shirley Hazard, author of a personal memoir about her friendship with the writer, *Greene on Capri*.

Memories of The Future

Two films, made in collaboration with the writer Peter Fuller, on the life, work and ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris...

The first of two remarkable films by Mike Dibb...takes a keenly critical look at the work and writings of William Morris...As with all Dibb's films there's a plenitude of ideas, an openness in the exposition and a well-argued thesis that points the relevance of historical material to contemporary concerns...At a time when British socialism urgently needs to return to roots and question the relation of the work ethic to automated production *and* to culture and society, this film must be acclaimed as a pioneering programme.

Time Out

Mike Dibb's film on Ruskin, to be seen as a follow-up or even 'prequel' to last week's 'William Morris', focuses on the social and philosophical background to Ruskin's writings and paintings. Once again it's a gloriously illustrated, cogently argued piece that provides a fascinating context for students of Victorian art and attitudes and, as with the Morris film, Dibb never loses sight of the contemporary relevance of his subject matter...Try not to miss this.

Time Out

A Curious Mind - AS Byatt (Bookmark)

When I first read AS Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession* I was amazed to find an important part of it took place in the familiar and much loved landscape of my childhood. Here were places I knew well on the rugged coast of East Yorkshire, and most particularly the seaside town of Filey, beautifully brought to new life as the romantic destination of a Victorian couple, indeed the locus of their relationship's consummation! It was both surprising, but also rather strange, as truthfully illicit sex and Filey had never before co-existed in my mind! It was just the little town where I grew up and my father had worked as a GP for many years. It was only later that I learned that it was also the resort to which Antonia Byatt and her family had often come from Sheffield for their annual summer holiday.

Knowing this undoubtedly sowed the seed for this film that however took quite a few years to germinate, until finally being accepted as a Bookmark Doc. But the thought of making a kind of 'home movie' in which I could revisit various locations I'd known as a child, and re-see them through the eyes of a writer I admired had remained an intriguing concept. And fortunately Antonia herself liked the idea too and it made an immediate bond between us.

Of course the film we made became very much more than that and developed into a wider and deeper writer's journey, in which Antonia visited other key locations, including her first school and family house in Sheffield, Malham Tarn Field Centre, a painter's studio, a science laboratory, her home in Putney and the London Library (which she loved) and the Quaker school in York (which she loathed). Everywhere we went and with whoever we met along the way Antonia freely opened up and reflected on many aspects of her life, ideas and curiosity as a writer, in ways that were compelling and at times very moving.

Somewhere Over The Rainbow

An Arena documentary about art and psychoanalysis, featuring the US colour field painter Robert Natkin and the UK writer and art critic Peter Fuller...

Somewhere over The Rainbow was essentially constructed from two interweaving long conversations. The first featured the engaging American 'colour field' painter Robert Natkin, talking openly (to MD behind the camera) about his life and work in and around his studio and beautiful home in Connecticut USA, as well as at the opening of an exhibition of his paintings in New York. The second was filmed in the UK with the art critic Peter Fuller, author of a major study of Art and Psychoanalysis who was just completing a book about Natkin's work, about which he talked with great insight from his home in Hackney, East London. During the film, sequences from these two related but separately filmed encounters were woven together with help from the sound track of *The Wizard of Oz*, one of Natkin's favourite films.

Steven Rose

A BBC4 profile of the leading biologist, science writer and political activist...

The Spirit of Lorca

This lyrical film about the life and work of Federico Garcia Lorca, Spain's greatest and best known 20th century poet and dramatist, was made to commemorate the 50th anniversary of his still appalling assassination at the hands of Franco's fascists in the first months of the Spanish Civil War.

With no pre-written script, but in the safe hands of Ian Gibson, Lorca's wonderfully articulate and passionate Irish biographer, and with many quotations from Lorca's own work, we follow his life and development as a writer, from his home town near Granada in Andalusia to the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, where he first met Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel. Along the way we hear warm testimonies from two Spanish poets who knew him, Luis Rosales and Rafael Alberti, and from his American student friend, still living in Vermont, Philip Cummings.

We also meet others who loved Lorca from afar, but for whom his work has been especially important in their lives: the Cuban poet Miguel Barnet, Nuria Espert, both talking and appearing in her memorable production of *Yerma*, members of the contemporary version of *La Barraca*, the travelling theatre company Lorca first founded, and in Jimena de la Frontera a very moving Pena Flamenca, in which various villagers, from the postman to a carpenter, recite, sing and play Lorca poems and songs.

The Fame and Shame of Salvador Dali

This was the second major biographical film I made with the Irish writer Ian Gibson. Ian and I had been fellow students at Trinity College, Dublin, both reading Spanish, although we didn't really know each other then - after all, he was one year ahead of me and a brilliant scholar, while I was a pretty hopeless one and spent most of my time at the movies! So it was only much later that we became good friends and a fruitful creative relationship developed during the making of these two revelatory feature length docs, the first, a very loving one, about Federico Garcia Lorca; the second, a very entertaining but more critical one, about Salvador Dali.

In both Ian was, as always, the relentlessly investigative biographer, stopping at nothing to get at the truth. At the same time he was engaging and relaxed and, with this Dali film as with the Lorca one, didn't want to be weighed down by a pre-written script. Of course we carefully planned things in advance, but beyond that every situation we encountered was an improvised occasion in which I could rely on Ian's extensive knowledge and easy eloquence to keep everything going.

His genuine curiosity about the lives he was exploring, as well as his immediate interest in whoever he was talking to, made people open up in unexpected ways. This was particularly important when examining a life as fascinating and contradictory as that of Salvador Dali, whose moustache and carefully constructed persona had made him the world's most celebrated and recognisable Surrealist. Of course his painting technique was extraordinary and his most memorable images genuinely arresting and subversive. At the same time he was a flamboyant and outrageous exhibitionist, often perversely, if humorously, untruthful, and at times politically offensive, even supporting Franco along the way. As someone says in the film 'he was both a genius and a swine!'

His early brilliant creative life, which also included a very close friendship with Lorca and two deliberately shocking film collaborations with Luis Bunuel, was dramatically redirected, both personally and financially, by his bizarre marriage to Gala; leading to a lifestyle corrupted by money and fame. In this Daliesque filmed journey, originally transmitted in two one hour parts, we move from Dali's very formative Catalan childhood and house in Cadaques to Madrid, Paris, London and New York; as well as to the two museums in Florida and Figueres devoted to his work. However, what gives this documentary an added edge is that it was made during the actual writing of Ian Gibson's biography, so some of its enjoyably diverse array of contributors were people he's meeting for the first time, and from whom he's discovering fascinating new information about recurring themes in Dali's art, as well as about controversial questions regarding his later financial circumstances and weird personal life.