

# Sight & Sound

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## THE FILMS OF OLD, WEIRD BRITAIN

PLUS

Dennis Hopper: the last interview, Cavalcanti: Britain's genius from Brazil, Catherine Breillat's 'Bluebeard', Serge Gainsbourg: the biopic

# ABSENT AUTHORS: FOLK IN ARTIST FILM

The growing presence of folk culture in the work of artist film-makers has its roots in the 1980s, when folk offered an alternative to Thatcherite views of society. By William Fowler



In the late 1990s American author Alec Foege noted that the English engage in and get excited about new cultural movements almost as quickly as they tire of them and move on. Seen in this light, the revived interest in folk culture in the UK over the last ten years could be seen as nothing short of astounding. It's visibly still working its way onwards, finding new and unusual places to evolve yet further. One only had to visit the Tate Triennial in 2009, for instance, to appreciate the substantial presence of folkloric and occult imagery in contemporary patronised art.

Several artist and independent film-makers such as Tacita Dean, Ben Rivers, Adam Chodzko, Stephen Sutcliffe and Matt Hulse have taken up the mantle, presenting elements of a folk or rural culture in their films. This work, however, does not exist without precedent. In decades past, Bruce Lacey and Jill Bruce and performer/film-makers the Neo-Naturists have evoked pagan histories, and if we include those who excavate the sublime and psychogeographic qualities of the rural landscape, then there are also films by David Hall, Steven Ball and Phillip Sanderson, Renny Croft, William Raban and Chris Welsby (the latter two, however, firmly reject any connection to romanticism). Perhaps more significant and surprising are the films produced in the years after punk, a time when electronic music was in ascendancy and Margaret Thatcher proclaimed there was no such thing as society – for which read 'community'. In this context, the subversive qualities of folk culture were evoked as if to fight through the political malaise and point to an English culture that excluded the current moment.

## THE TWO NATIONS

'The Floral Faddy Furry Dance Day', above, documented the survival of community while 'The Last of England', below, bewailed its death

Derek Jarman, a vocal critic of Thatcher and of her legislation concerning gay rights – see, among others, his apocalyptic state-of-the-nation film, *The Last of England* (1987) – was also a studied enthusiast for the more esoteric sides of English history. He inserted Elizabeth I's occult aide John Dee into his 1977 punk film *Jubilee*, having drawn on similar imagery for several of his Super 8 films earlier in the 1970s. His lesser-known contemporary Richard Philpott also drew on esoteric subject-matter, but addressed his political concerns more directly. Considered today, Philpott's attention to subcultures and the politically marginalised is similar in attitude to that of Turner Prize-winner Jeremy Deller.

Philpott's film *The Flora Faddy Furry Dance Day* (1989) locates the eponymous Cornish May Day custom within a history of English paganism – a



notion that folklorists would wince at. More interesting is its examination of the relationship between its status both as a spectacle and as an evolving and involving phenomenon. Sequences of dancing on the Helston town high street are intercut repeatedly with archive footage of children dancing on the same occasion many years earlier. Then, after repeated use of its musical refrain (recognisable to some via Terry Wogan's 1978 hit 'The Floral Dance'), cameraman Philpott uproots himself from the sidelines and joins in the dance. It's an understated climax to the film, recalling Jean Rouch's significant moment of inclusion in a Nigerian village ritual in his *Yenendi de Ganghel* (1968). These moments challenge and transform the power relationships inherent in documentary and reflect the very basis of folk ritual. The connection between audience and participant is significantly complicated; there are main players, but the ritual belongs to everyone in the community.

Other films by Richard Philpott explore the links between folk culture and contemporary politics more closely. While the one-minute short *Miners Appeal* (1984) was shot on 35mm and shown in cinemas to raise money for the strikers, it also intervened in the cinematic process (not unlike current LUX/ICO touring project the Artists Cinema) and questioned the role of the media. His *Spirit of Albion* (1987) built on this, privileging the lifestyles and opinions of various new-age traveller groups – including the multi-vehicle 'Peace Convoy', with whom Philpott travelled for extended periods of time.

Presented as heirs to the legacy of William Blake, these travellers and peace protesters were elsewhere identified as one of the 'enemies within' – and suffered the consequences, experiencing vicious police brutality, notably at the so-called 'Battle of the Beanfield' in 1985. Profoundly radical for a time when the BBC edited a news report so it looked as though a striking miner had attacked a policeman first, and not vice versa, Philpott's film attempted to present a more involved version of the story of these nomadic people and their fight for access to Stonehenge.

It's this reaction to authority that continues to keep folk interesting. Folk can be presented as conservative and reactionary, but at its heart it ridicules authority. Andrew Kötting and Peter Greenaway have toyed with this, parodying the information film to discuss rural life and comment on the forms that have tried to define it. But folk is even more tantalising for artists who wish to break down audience boundaries – it's a form of culture where the author is not held to be important.

■ The BFI presents *English Heretics: Folk and Film in the Age of the Machine* in summer 2011