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A Radio, A Watch and A Bicycle



Sydney-based filmmaker Nick Torrens discusses his 12-years-in-the-making doco 'China's 3 Dreams', which explores the effects of capitalism and commercialism on three Chinese generations.

Australian film has a strong tradition of documentary making. However, given how little access the filmmakers have to mainstream commercial theatrical release there is still some way to go in spreading and building the audience. This is just one of the dilemmas facing documentary filmmaker Nick Torrens. Torrens, along with his friends and contemporaries such as the late Dennis O'Rourke and Pat Fiske, continues to ply his trade driven mostly by passion rather than box office.

Torrens spoke to us from his home in Sydney. In particular he talked about his latest film *China's 3 Dreams*. The film played to great acclaim and sell out screenings at this year's Sydney Film Festival. Torrens wants to express his gratitude to Jenny Neighbour (the deputy director of SFF who has a special expertise in documentary) for picking up the film.

China's 3 Dreams represents the result of Torrens' long engagement with an ever-changing China (he also wrote *The Men Who Would Conquer China* in 2004). It reminds us that China has changed faster than most countries in recent times as it strives for ever more financial success and national productivity. Moreover, it has a

unique political history. Only a generation and a half ago it was in the grip of Maoism and, in particular, the misguided forced changes of the Cultural Revolution which affected more or less the whole population. Torrens' film aims to capture some of that journey. He points out that the generation that experienced that movement (and, in some cases, was a direct agent in it) will not be around forever. Though the film is not *just* about the Cultural Revolution, it is an important index of social change. Torrens also tells of how he began to film in China increasingly as a sort of free agent. This partially improvised approach gave him rare access and documentary freedom. "I had no money but I was on my own. I was always filming. Sometimes I would find someone and then I would pay them an hourly rate or a day rate and we would film and that's how I was able to do it."

It is this local sense of ordinary Chinese lives and opinions that gives Torrens' film its sense of authenticity. For example, in relation to the aforementioned Cultural Revolution, it would not have been possible for it to happen without some diligence – even fanaticism – on behalf of ordinary Red Guards in local communities. However, the policy/movement is now largely repressed or forgotten. Torrens describes how he would stumble upon key local information. "We would talk to the people and they would say 'so and so, he was a Red Guard'. And then the man would say 'No, I wasn't a Red Guard'. And I thought; '*now* there's a good story, a Red Guard who wasn't a Red Guard!'"

Some of the film's most arresting moments come from filming the old Red Guard who tells his story in a disused cemetery which few foreigners would ever be allowed to visit. As he tells his story he starts to tear up partly through regret perhaps at what happened (and what he may have done) but also – and this is crucial – for the sheer sense of loss of the opportunity that might have been. The Red Guard ends the interview by walking away from camera. As he goes he calls out that the dream could still be recovered. China will be great once more. Indeed.



It also turns out that China's 3 dreams (originally in the pre-boom days the three 'dreams' for ordinary Chinese were said to be a radio, a watch and a bicycle) are nicely paralleled in his film by three generations. The oldest generation in the film are the grandparents' generation. They lived through this turbulent past that still haunts

the present. Then there is the parent generation, but Torrens also gets footage from the new generation. As he recalls, this youth generation seem very different and hard to understand for their parents.

“[To the elders] these are the young people who don’t know anything and who don’t care about anything. So I got interviews from all these types and I would sit down and interview them with the help of someone I could grab to translate. They were done in that way.”

When Torrens does include interview material from the twenty-something student types you do get the sense of how little they understand – or want to be tied to – any particular aspect of the Communist past. However, they also have a vague sense that there is a problem with not knowing (or not being allowed to know) that past. Today they have much more than bicycles and they seem to expect that China will just go on getting richer and richer as a country endlessly. Money isn’t the only topic of conversation though. It is also an insight into how young people the world over have to move beyond current circumstances and beliefs as they chart new waters.

In order to make the sort of film that he wanted to make, Torrens had to let the documentary evolve organically in a sense. He also had to get footage from aspects of China that are ‘ordinary’ partly in the sense of not being self-consciously modern. Torrens was delighted to find a thousand year old small community not very far from a big commercial centre.

“I saw a real community. It was also purely Chinese. In weeks there I only saw two Westerners. I thought ‘This is where I want to be’. This is China but it is not a China we ever see on television and it is not a China of history. It is China of now.”

Returning to the theme of how political, cultural and economic change has swept over the whole society, there is a key scene towards the end of the film. There is a birthday party for an older man – a grandparent figure who was denounced in the 1960s (by work colleagues who are known to him). He served time in harsh and remote exile. Such is the desire to push for the truth of how that could have happened, that the woman in the film asks him to elaborate there and then. To do so in front of his relations would mean he would lose face of course. However, his anger is more directed at her gauche timing for asking him, of all times, on that one day.

The fly on the wall camera catches a universal moment there; compacted with familial, personal, historical and political meaning. It is documentary gold. Only someone with Torrens’ connections, cultural understanding and patient eye for everyday truth could have packaged it so.

by Julian Wood | 2014