

# International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam



During the event, the Netherlands Association of Cinema Editors presented an 'Assembling Reality' program

BY ADRIAN PENNINGTON

Master classes presented by Danish editor Nils Pagh Andersen and 2016 honorary Oscar® winner Frederick Wiseman were the centerpieces of a day focused on the art of editing, Nov. 19, during the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam.

Curated by the Netherlands Association of Cinema Editors (NCE), 'Assembling Reality' featured screenings, panel talks and one-on-one presentations. "The idea that a documentary shows an unmediated reality is definitively eradicated during the editing phase," explains Job ter Burg, ACE, (Elle) president of NCE. "Documentaries do not reveal an unmediated reality, but rather give the viewer an idea of the relationship between image and reality. With the IDFA we arranged a day of talks, Q&As and screenings to explore the role of editors in constructing documentary narratives."

Andersen, editor of more than 250 films including the Oscar nominated *Pathfinder*, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, told the audience, "A lot of the time, filmmakers film the extraordinary, and forget to film the ordinary." In reference to the documentary, *Prostitution: Behind the Veil*, he said, "We forget that the ordinary puts light on the extraordinary. So we looked for those moments in the material."

*Photo by Corinne de Korver*

Anderson shared insight into how, with director Joshua Oppenheimer, he made the remarkable and powerful films, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, examining mass murder in Indonesia during the 1960s. “Thanks to the impact of reality shows, documentary makers have to face the problem that everybody is performing. You can’t be a fly on the wall since people react to the camera. What we were looking for in the material was a crack in the performance. These were the moments of authenticity.”

“What I also learned from these films is to hold back and mystify. We took the silence very seriously. The act of killing is very noisy, almost screaming at you, so we had to make this film (*The Look of Silence*) as silent as possible.” He added, “Far too often I see films which depict people crying, but it is the audience that should be crying. It’s 10 times more powerful to see a character holding back the tears and to give that space to the audience. “With *The Look of Silence* we pushed that moment to the end. It’s a moment of relief after building up the tension. One of my best tricks as an editor is to hold back.”

The program included a panel discussion with editors Anne Fabini (*Morris from America*, *Return to Homs*), Per K. Kirkegaard (*Shadow World*, *Armadillo*) and Claudio Hughes (*A Family Affair*, *Stranded*). Also speaking was Sara Kolster, an interactive director and designer who specializes in digital storytelling. They discussed their craftsmanship including translating a director’s point of view and also touched on new technologies, documentary formats and distribution platforms that have changed the editor’s creative process in recent years. Following a special screening of 1970’s *The Hospital* - a classic study of New York’s Metropolitan Hospital Center - the film’s director and editor, Frederick Wiseman, participated in a Q&A.

The 86 year old also showed clips from his films, *Basic Training* (1971) and *Welfare* (1975). “I don’t like the description, ‘observational cinema,’ because for me that suggests that you just set up the camera in the corner of the room and let it run forever,” he said. “It smacks of anthropological filmmaking, which I don’t think I do. These movies are made up of hundreds and thousands of choices. So you have to observe, you have to see what’s going on, but you also have to choose what it is you’re going to shoot, the way you’re going to shoot it and the way you’re going to use it. Observational, to me, is too passive a term. “The toughest film to edit is always the most recent one,” he added. “I’m not kidding - because that’s the one I remember best.”

I just finished editing one and I worked very hard on it, because each film presents a different set of editing and structural problems. “I have to figure out the consequence of starting the film with one sequence and ending it with another, and what the relationship is between the beginning and the ending. I have to do that by a process of trial and error, and in that process I begin to discover what the themes and the point of view are.”

Held annually since 1988, IDFA takes place at various venues across Amsterdam including performing arts theater Brakke Grond Rode Zaal, which was where the NCE/IFDA program was held this year.



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