

Holly Aylett (Ed.), *Marc Karlin: Look Again* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, in association with Mark Karlin Archive, 2015), pp. 320, colour illustrations. ISBN: 9781781381656 (hb), £25.

With the surprising ascendance of Jeremy Corbyn on the political scene, it is an interesting time to look back or *Look Again* (as the title of this book has it) at the life and work of Marc Karlin, who was perhaps the preeminent filmic representative and historian of the British tradition of left-wing dissent. Most notably, his *Utopias* (broadcast on Channel 4 in 1989) was both a detailed history of British socialism, and a response to the sense of crisis that had engulfed the Left in the Thatcherite 1980s. This lavishly illustrated book draws upon Karlin's fascinating archive, containing reproductions in their original formats of correspondence, sketches, film ideas, thoughts, plans, storyboards, stills and photographs. In this respect it can be said to bear a passing resemblance to the recently published (2013) sketchbooks of the late Derek Jarman, whose long-term friend and colleague Sally Potter wrote the foreword to this book. But in many respects it is closer to what Ezra Pound called an 'active anthology,' a book that sets ideas in motion, and establishes a complex network of internal cross-references, concerning Karlin and his ideas, images, politics, collaborators and films.

As a filmmaker, activist and editor Karlin was more of a facilitator of the talents of others than a relatively self-contained English iconoclast and artist like Derek Jarman or Humphrey Jennings (who shared Karlin's fascination with John Milton, social surrealism and experimental sociology), and hence the particular nature of his contribution to British cinema is difficult to classify, not least due to the extent to which he has been hitherto excluded from its history. As Sukhdev Sandhu remarks in the brilliantly perceptive essay which opens the book, Karlin has long been a figure who is more of a 'rumour' than a legend:

For those who did not have the chance to meet him or work with him, or who were not immediately involved with the aesthetic and political battles that engaged him, his presence was spectral; he was a director of films that were almost impossible to see; a proselytiser for a televisual culture that no longer existed, the editor and publisher of a film journal, *Vertigo*, that few stockists took [17].

Given the intangible and mysterious presence/absence of the filmmaker, the book benefits from containing personal reflections of those who *did* work with Marc, rather than an

academic exegesis of his aesthetics and preoccupations. Such testimony casts light on the sheer amounts of energy and deliberation that undergirded every shot and every sequence in his oeuvre, despite the low budgets with which Karlin and colleagues worked. Fluid, meditative and immersive, films like *For Memory* (transmitted by the BBC in 1986) – with its frequent uses of stillness, silence, photographs, poetic narration and its slow glides of camera tracking - were the antithesis of the urgent activist camcorder tapes shot during the 1980s. In this sense Karlin, either bravely or intuitively, went against the grain of the received wisdom in documentary that ‘the less polished a film, the more credible it will be found’ (Bruzzi 2000: 6).

Even on a personal level, Karlin appears to have been a wonderful tangle of contradictions. Despite being an avowedly international socialist of mixed (Polish/Latvian) heritage, a Francophile (Karlin spent his childhood in Paris), and an apprentice of the globe-trotting experimental filmmaker Chris Marker, he hardly ever strayed from his office in Central London and his home in Highbury. All the archival materials in the book testify to Karlin’s obsessive attention to detail in every aspect of the conceptual development and realization of his films. Yet (in a verbatim roundtable discussion) his friends agree that one of his flaws was that ‘every film Marc made just got dropped’ [52]. Karlin never attended a film festival or even organized crew screenings.

Although this appears from the evidence of this book to have been chiefly due to crippling self-doubt and modesty, it also seems to me also to reinforce two ideas. Firstly that Marc’s films, as experiments in ‘trying to mark out a territory’ [54], were therefore always somehow provisional staging posts, and reflective of his own ‘stateless’ identity, as someone who had spent the first two years of his life in the crèche of a refugee camp [as revealed by Hermione Harris on page 127]. Secondly (and more prosaically) it suggests that, despite having fought tirelessly against its dominant ideologies and lack of imagination, television - an ‘ephemeral’ medium so voracious for the contributions of documentarians that they often don’t even have time to view or retain their finished work – was indeed the right medium for Marc Karlin. British television in the post-war period had supported the long careers of filmmakers like Denis Mitchell and Philip Donnellan, whose film essays are similarly exploratory, unclassifiable and neglected. This appears to be a view shared by Sandhu, who cites them in paying tribute to ‘works that in their ludic vagrancy, visual imagination, intellectual heft and historical depth ought to be included in all discussion of British film rather than partitioned into what often feels like the minor field of small-screen studies’ [18].

When making the landmark *Nightcleaners* (1975) Marc Karlin and colleagues in the Berwick Street Film Collective found inspiration from Godard and Resnais in ‘breaking from the tyranny of synch-sound’, but – without wishing to sound like a cultural nationalist - they could just as easily have taken lessons from closer-to-home mavericks like Mitchell and Donnellan. A similar argument could be made about the importance of this book for young

filmmakers today – Karlin’s films, like the scattered or vanished output of the workshop movement of which he was part, should be studied, so that British independent cinema avoids becoming cut off from its own roots. As Holly Aylett (the editor of this volume) observed in a roundtable discussion at a screening of Marc Karlin’s work in Bristol in 2012, her generation were the beneficiaries of the training and opportunities provided by the workshop movement which grew up in the early years of Channel 4, whereas the current generation are the beneficiaries of the digital technology revolutions of access to cameras and online distribution. Then the fight was to get hold of equipment to make films for a new outlet, whereas now the fight is to get them noticed on a variety of platforms. As I write, the future of Channel 4, whose existence owes so much to the campaigning activities of Karlin and his colleagues in the Independent Filmmakers Association in the ‘70s and early ‘80s, lies in doubt due to privatisation plans. In tackling the issues of how to protect Channel 4’s remit and how to make films in a hostile funding climate, the current generation could learn a lot from Marc Karlin.

Ieuan Franklin, Bournemouth University

Bruzzi, S. (2000). *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge).