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Subversion - TV gets serious

AUSTRALIAN television is rarely serious, even when it is wittering alarmistly about paedophilia, pornography or men who have fathered 63 children by nine wives.

John Hughes's documentary, *One Way Street*, comes as something of an oasis, a film which is vigorously serious about its subject, form and medium.

The film is subtitled "Fragments for Walter Benjamin", the German Jewish philosopher and literary critic who committed suicide in 1940, rather than be handed over to the Gestapo.

Hughes, a documentary maker and Monash film academic, admits he sold the idea to the ABC as a bio-pic but he was never content to leave it at that.

True, the film opens with Benjamin's despairing death in a hotel on the Swiss/French border but it then flows into an inventive montage of text, readings, life story and "talking head" academics. You only get a fragmented sense of Benjamin's chronology (born 100 years ago this year), but there is a strong sense of the fascination of this evasive figure.

Hughes says: "I did make a bio-pic, but I also wanted to simultaneously work against and deconstruct the conventions of the form in various ways."

He puts the fact that this documentary was funded down to chance ("It must have fitted arbitrarily into some dynamic that was going on in the ABC at the time").

"These days it is impossible to get money unless the documentary is sold to the ABC or SBS, so there are around two people in the country who are determining what gets made," he says.

"The result is that everyone has to speak the way television likes to speak. I wanted to work against this, so this film is also a formal critique of television conventions.

"When it came to taking about Benjamin's suicide, I wanted to address the broader question of death as part of the culture of the time as the only way to avoid

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going back to the television's preference for the personal story."

Hughes is a quietly pensive man but his thoughtfulness cannot be blamed for the speeding motorcycle that mowed him down on a Parisian pedestrian crossing on the last day of overseas filming for *One Way Street*.

He is emphatic that the fault was with a panicking motorbike rider rather than his own inability to negotiate French traffic while carrying a film camera.

The result was a smashed right shin, now hammered back together with an aluminium plate which he says he can still feel. He discharged himself from hospital so he could return to Australia to film the "drama" segments of the film, on crutches.

Benjamin might have appreciated Hughes's surprising offer of his X-rays plates for publication. He was one of the first philosophers to foresee the importance of a movement from word-based to image-based culture; his most famous essay is "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

The academics in the film are one of its greatest strengths. They positively radiate an engagement with Benjamin that is emotional and personal and the palpable quality of thought in the interviews is the result of Hughes having 90-minute conversations while his camera rolled.

"I am not sure why the character of Walter Benjamin is so engaging but it is quite true that people are just fascinated by the character and personality of the man, and by the work," he says. "Maybe it is his enigmatic quality, and the poetic qualities of his writings which were so seductive."

According to Hughes, Benjamin was a visionary, both in the literal sense, and in his



Walter Benjamin

ability to be almost prophetic about cultural direction.

His work has been rediscovered and reinvented by successive generations. The new Left of the 60s responded to someone who criticised capitalism but made no concessions to totalitarianism (one of his lovers was eventually to spend 10 years in a Stalin camp).

In the 80s, Benjamin was revived by groups such as the new British Cultural Studies movement which was impressed by the fact that he understood the mass culture of film (and eventually television) and was ambivalent about it, rather than dismissing it as means of manipulation and control.

And in the present day, Hughes says Benjamin has become a battle ground for arguments about literary theory and philosophy, with everyone from Jacques Derrida to Laurie Anderson having their piece.

"Benjamin's work became the site of intellectual debate for succeeding generations, partly the

result of its poetic dimension and fragmentary quality; it is very hard to pin down," he says.

At a time when the dominant ideologies around him were totalising, seeking to understand the world within one overriding framework, Benjamin argued that it was only possible to focus on discreet elements.

He believed that meaning or enlightenment, unsought, could slide through. One academic in the film compares this with the cabalistic way of thinking.

One Way Street, with its vividly restless montage of archival, documentary, printed text, and "drama" (with Nic Loutharis as Benjamin), embodies that way of viewing culture.

"That is an ongoing argument about Benjamin, whether he believed there was an absolute truth of fullness behind the cultural artefacts we see or whether those artefacts manufacture what we call truthfulness," Hughes says.

"My own view is based on a conversation that he says Kafka had. Someone who asked him if there was any hope and Kafka replied 'Infinite hope, but not for us,' and I think Benjamin's position was that there is a truth but not for us.

"However, that should not be read as a simple celebration of diversity. It is important to recognise the problem and try to have an ethical or political stance in light of that environment. That is the political position which speaks in the documentary, if you like."

One Way Street has already made an impact in Germany, where Benjamin is a big industry and Benjamin films are thicker on the ground than Australian pedestrians in Paris. It has been invited to the prestigious Leipzig documentary festival and is touring as part of an exhibition.

**One Way Street* will be screened on the ABC as part of *The Big Picture - New Directions*, on Thursday, December 10, at 9.30 pm.