

Full Frame: Buffalo Dreams, Monk By Blood, Hacked Circuit, Fairytale of the Three Bears Reviews

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Editor's Note: The following reviews are part of our coverage of the 2014 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. For more information please visit fullframefest.org or follow Full Frame on Twitter.

It's as reductive as it is, perhaps perplexingly, requisite to consider a varied slate of cinema through a handful of shared ideals; festival coverage is, by nature, tailored toward such snapshot *l'état du cinema* summation. There's a great deal more to the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, celebrating its seventeenth edition in North Carolina this week, than can really be done justice by any fleeting overlook; if there's but one thing this meek missive can attest, it's that nothing speaks so well for these films as themselves. Across an offbeat array of concerns, four of the fest's short film selections prove with diversity and distinction that the screen is less a barrier between us and those we watch than a window into their lives, and through them our own.

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No moment speaks better to such a sensibility than that in *Fairytale of the Three Bears* where a toddler, taken aback by the sight of the camera, reaches out and prods the lens. “We used to be completely different people,” a middle-aged man wearily notes in Tristan Daws’ delicately paced survey of the Soviet shadow on modern rural Russia, as the child offers potent proof. History hangs a bittersweet weight in this snow-covered landscape; another interviewee seems more fifteen than fifty when his elderly mother interrupts his telling of the eponymous Goldilocks tale to insist he put his hat on. The emotional heft of the score’s crescendo saves *Fairytale of the Three Bears* a trifling fate; the film, like one subject’s life, “just passed as if it was a fairytale”.

If *Buffalo Dreams* were a fairytale, t’would have to bear the name Grimm; *Buffalo Nightmares* seems a more apt appellation for the Scottish-set look at a farm whose function seems more based on idealism than practicality. However startlingly strange Scott Shand’s line of work might seem, though, Maurice O’Brien’s camera renders it beautifully: Americana is deceptively smuggled to the highland hills here, the whipping winds and bird cries of the soundtrack offering an evocative aural equivalent to the magisterial sight of the bison themselves. Indeed the subject’s so strange and slight that the film emerges more curio than compelling; never outstaying its welcome, *Buffalo Dreams* is a better calling card for its crew than it is a portrait of its subject, for all the serene beauty of its cloud-covered skies.

Framed phenomenally within the logistical nightmare of this extravagant long take, consummately choreographed and yet borne all the while on a stirring spontaneity, Deborah Stratman’s movie is an ode to the efforts that go into making movies seem effortless, an apt focus for a film itself so accomplished.

From the slow arch round a suburban street corner that introduces *Hacked Circuit* to the cut that comes, finally, fifteen minutes later, this is a movie as impressive a piece of storytelling as it is a technical resume, peering behind the scenes of the foley process like a factual *Berberian Sound Studio*. Framed phenomenally within the logistical nightmare of this extravagant long take, consummately choreographed and yet borne all the while on a stirring spontaneity, Deborah Stratman’s movie is an ode to the efforts that go into making movies seem effortless, an apt focus for a film itself so accomplished. It’s not just for a closing credits dedication to Walter Murch “with apologies, gratitude and admiration” that this is essential viewing for movie fans.

If he and his sound design for *The Conversation* inform *Hacked Circuit* above all, it’s the difficulty of honouring the past that binds this bunch of movies together. “I have high expectations, so please do your best,” the young hero of Ema Ryan Yamazaki’s *Monk by Blood*—a 21 year-old heir to an 800 year-old Japanese temple—is told in the touching film’s first moments. The same might be said by any of the unseen ancestors that shadow these stories. To say the tension between ascribed destiny and individual decisions defines each of these movies is reductive, and yet all the while it’s requisite too: if the Full Frame Festival sets out to show us what’s up with documentaries these days, this selection suggests they have us perusing the past as we fumble toward the future.

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Ronan Doyle is an Irish freelance film critic, whose work has appeared on Indiewire, [f](#) [t](#) FilmLinc, Film Ireland, FRED Film Radio, and elsewhere. He recently contributed a chapter on Arab cinema to the book Celluloid Ceiling, and is currently entangled in an all-encompassing volume on the work of Woody Allen. When not watching movies, reading about movies, writing about movies, or thinking about movies, he can be found talking about movies on Twitter. He is fuelled by tea and has heard of sleep, but finds the idea frightfully silly.

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