

Mark Donaldson on *A Man and a Camera*

There is a beautiful moment early on in Guido Hendriks's *A Man and a Camera*. Faced with the film's voiceless observer, a woman in a headscarf disappears back into her house while her husband attempts to communicate with the spectral figure on his doorstep. She soon reappears holding her toddler, presenting them to the camera and stating, 'this child can't hear or speak either'. It's a moving and spontaneous moment of empathy.

This spontaneity is one of the joys of Hendriks's film, which upturns and reimagines the conventions of observational filmmaking. In the work of directors like Frederick Wiseman or the Maysles brothers, permission is initially sought and the film's subjects are often instructed to carry on as normal, as if the cameras aren't there. Here, the camera is unavoidable and there is an open invitation to interact with the lens. Some recoil, hiding behind trees or cracks in their doorway, while others confront the lone cameraman, asking 'Why are you doing this?' or physically putting up barriers with their fists. Hendriks allows the objects of his observations to guide the film. If they become agitated or aggressive, he leaves. If they invite him in for coffee, he steps over the threshold into their homes. He allows himself to be directed by his subjects rather than the other way around.

In giving up control, *A Man and a Camera* avoids getting caught up in the sprawling institutions or big characters you find in traditional nonfiction films. Instead, it trains the lens on the banalities of suburbia as it flits in and out of everyday lives. We observe family breakfasts and nights in front of the television while a biography of Adolf Hitler is hastily, apologetically hidden from view.

Hendriks's suburban ethnography has just as much in common with the work of Robert Flaherty than it does the work of Robert Drew. As Western society continues to rethink its colonial past, *A Man and a Camera* is timely in the way it reflects the camera back on the white Europeans who once wielded it. If we're uncomfortable with a cameraman observing our daily routines, why do we think nothing of the same thing being done further afield?

Ultimately, Hendriks is grappling with the age-old search for Dziga Vertov's 'objective truth'. And in so doing, he deconstructs and reimagines centuries of cinematic conventions to provide us with a singular vision of contemporary suburbia.

*Mark Donaldson is a film programmer and podcaster*