

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
06 MAY 1999

Blood on the Tracks

Looking back on the Rockumentary

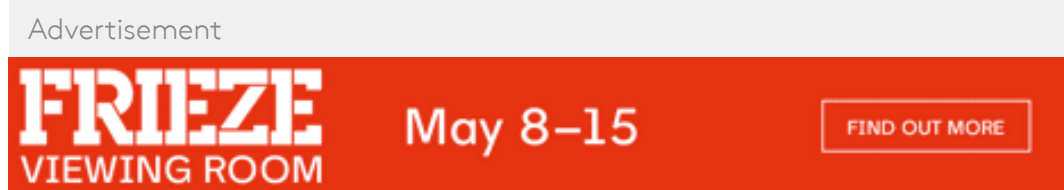
The BBC recently programmed a late-night music double bill: a newly restored print of D. A. Pennebaker's documentary of Bob Dylan's 1965 England tour, *Don't Look Back* (1967), and Nick Broomfield's *Kurt and Courtney* (1998). Although separated by a gulf of over 30 years and by the chasm that separates gossip and literature, both films, perhaps inadvertently, make explicit the nature of the rockumentary's paradoxical promise - that an access-all-areas pass to a star's reality often fails to deliver any insight into the constituents of stardom and popular music.

Moralising, conservative and fundamentally uninterested in any but the crudest readings of the music or culture that produced either of its subjects, *Kurt and Courtney* was like an episode of Jerry Springer after the Larry Sanders of *Don't Look Back*. In a clumsy attempt to feed a public hungry for the most superficial details of a performer's existence, the film appropriates the shaky hand of verité cinema without any of its intellectual motivations. Broomfield, ironically the person we learn most about, is rarely out of the frame, ponderously offering banal, tautological observations about Cobain's formative years ('Punk rock was an escape, it offered him a way out...') while attempting to uncover the 'truth' of his premise - that Courtney Love may be implicated in Cobain's death. The result is a film which proves only how boring a series of hollow statements about someone you've never met can be. Sacrificing content for a narrative drive down a dead end street, it is perhaps apt that, thanks to an injunction from Courtney Love, Broomfield was unable to use any of Nirvana's music - its absence only serves to emphasise its peripheral importance to the film as a whole. By the last frame you can almost hear the wind whistling through the gap Broomfield has created between intention and end product. 'Truth stronger than fiction' screams the film's promotional posters. If *Kurt and Courtney* has one quality, it lies in its demonstration that a documentary will always have a harder time revealing a single truth than it will many.

'Oh, I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now' sings Dylan in *Don't Look Back*, a restless and radical embodiment of its own time which looks far less dated than *Kurt and Courtney*. But the film, very much a product of the 60s, is also a critique of the period that produced it. It opens with the famous placard sequence to 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' in which the 23 year-old Dylan, parodying the sloganeering of protest politics, fractures the lyrics of his own elliptical and enigmatic song into a series of visual sound bites. Interspersed with glimpses of Allan Ginsberg walking with a cane behind Dylan, it's a sequence which, with its self-conscious examination of the structure of the song and the context that created it, establishes the tone of the film: Dylan's preoccupation with dissolving certainties about both music and culture; Pennebaker's scrutiny of a moment in history when politics and music began to merge in an unprecedented way; and the strategies of Albert Grossman (Dylan's manager and a producer on the film) to inflate the performer's already semi-mythical status for financial gain.

Shot in a dissolving black and white chiaroscuro, devoid of narration or captions and unsequentially edited, *Don't Look Back* subtly wrestles with the rockumentary's fundamental problem - how and why should music and musicians be represented visually. Unlike *Kurt and Courtney*, which never considers pushing its audience to reconsider the cause and effect of either popular music or the status of pop stars, *Don't Look Back* attempts to examine Dylan both as a person and a cultural product. Following Dylan and his entourage through a blur of hotel rooms and concerts, the landscape of the film is determinedly nocturnal - cigarettes flare in the dark, everyone always seems slightly drunk and fans call out nervously, unsure of how best to respond to a musician who entreats them to privilege words as much as melodies. Pennebaker's sensual attention to the dynamic tonal shifts and abstract possibilities inherent in every banal encounter responds to the music with a language that owes as much to the vocabulary of music as it does film. As if it's holding its breath and listening to the sounds it's registering, the film is at once participatory and abstracted.

Prior to the mid-60s, rock 'n' roll movies were the Hollywood musical's poor relation: saccharine promotional vehicles created to sell records, defuse the power of dissent within popular music and to devalue youth culture as a viable and articulate voice within mainstream culture. Pennebaker's treatment of popular music as worthy of analysis may seem obvious now, but served as a kind of ground zero for the music documentary. Its look has become so imitated and, in cases like *Kurt and Courtney*, so devalued, that it is difficult to imagine how radical a piece of filmmaking it must have seemed at the time.



Seemingly as influenced by contemporary American literature and the French nouvelle vague as he was by music, Dylan's utterances throughout *Don't Look Back* - evasive, aggressive, playful and aphoristic - often sound more like early Godard than Godard himself ('I don't see anything to believe in... we all have our definitions of these words', 'he that's not being busy born is busy dying...' etc.). This was perhaps prescient: a year after *Don't Look Back's* release, Godard released his own rockumentary, *One Plus One*.

'I want to make a neorealistic musical, which is already a contradiction' said Godard in 1961. In *One Plus One*, he filmed the Rolling Stones in the studio recording 'Sympathy for the Devil', but with typical deferral of resolution, the film finishes without the song ever being played in its entirety - although not before popular music's uneasy relationship to its own representation is thrown into sharp relief. Without any incursions backstage, the homogenous identity of the band is disrupted to reveal the ultimately intangible personality of the 'star' - each band member, in headphones, is isolated in a minimal recording booth, and forced to try and get the song right - which, over the course of the film becomes a symbol of Godard trying to get culture right. The subtle shifts that inevitably occur in the repetition of the song reflect the shifts in meaning that occur when a cultural paradigm is repeated and scrutinised. In a post-68 gesture, Godard's disillusionment with culture is mirrored in his employment of disorder and fragmentation as the one unifying principle within the film. Popular music is posited as only one of many divisive elements in the conception of ways to represent social realities. The ambiguous first line of the song - 'please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste' - is sung repeatedly until it resonates through images of culture at its most extreme. These include scenes of women spray painting revolutionary slogans around a city, and of black revolutionaries interrogating and shooting white women or reading from various texts about the politics and racism inherent in popular music, surrounded by car wrecks. These episodes are accompanied by a BBC-like voiceover reading from a cheap spy thriller, interspersed with vicious asides about Marxists ('porn using John Berger's daughter's cunt'). Although the Stones are never interviewed, they are nonetheless constantly scrutinised by the camera - a kind of mechanical audience, both fan and interrogator. A young woman in a forest, however, is interviewed - in a cheesy acknowledgement of oversimplified nature/culture dichotomies, she is asked questions about culture to which she can only answer yes or no: 'Is there a possibility of psychological escape from Vietnam?' 'No'. 'Is a man of culture as different from an artist as a historian is from a man of action?' 'Yes'.

The BBC breathlessly promoted *Kurt and Courtney* and *Don't Look Back* as if they were the same thing - two films about music and musicians. And, of course, in a very basic sense, both share a certain fly on the wall look while deferring any kind of conclusion about their subject. But that's where the similarities end. Film and music for Godard and Pennebaker is a way of examining a given historical moment redolent with possibilities - new words, sounds and images. If Broomfield has absorbed the look of their films, it is in their most diluted form - conferring legitimacy on the ramblings of pop stars, without examining what they say about the culture that produced them. I tried to buy a video of *Don't Look Back* at Virgin Megastore but was told it's been deleted. On my way out, I passed a big display of *Kurt and Courtney* beneath the slogan 'The Movie Courtney Doesn't Want You to See'. Sensible *Courtney*.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

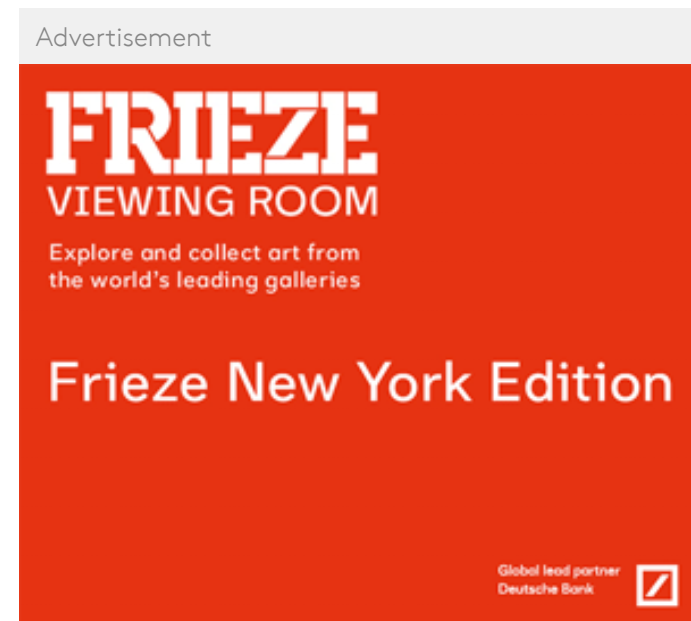
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1. Manny Farber, *Negative Space*, Manny Farber on the Movies, Studio Vista Limited, London, 1971, p.259

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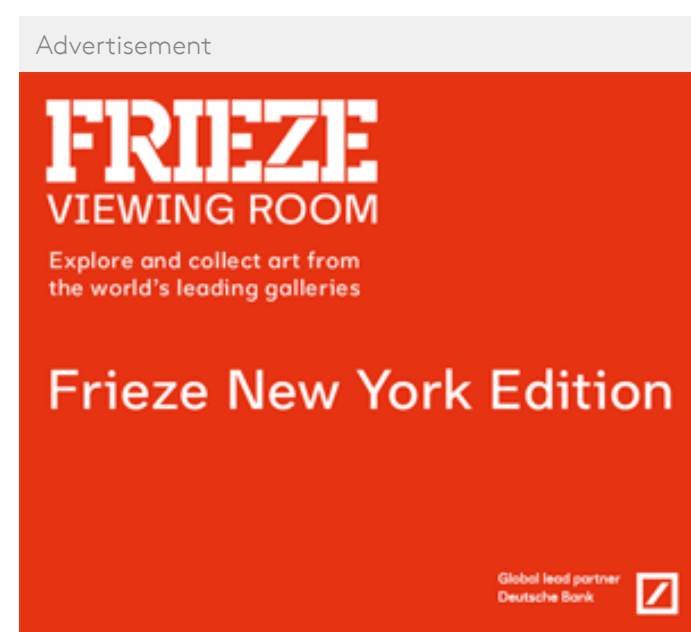
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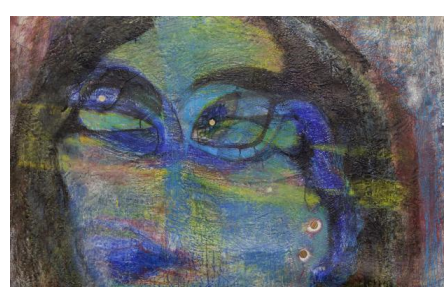


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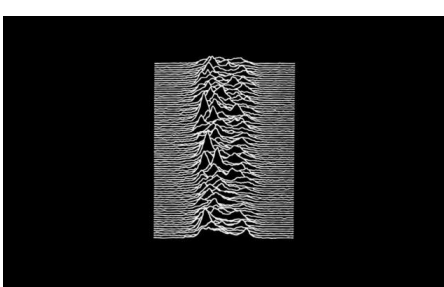
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