

## KEEP ON ROLLING

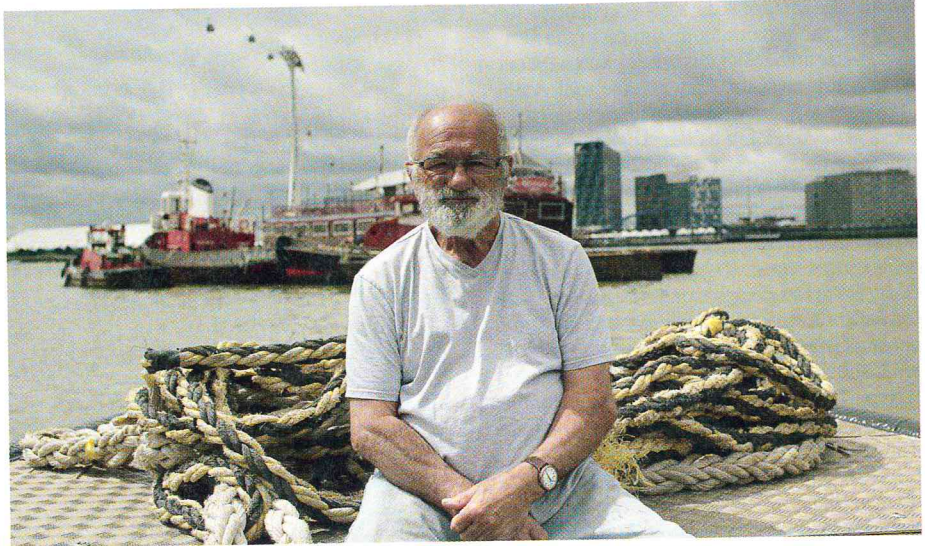
The Thames has inspired less than its share of notable filmmaking but a current exhibition showcases a raft of stimulating new work

## By Sukhdev Sandhu

Almost everyone has heard of the Thames. Painters and poets such as Turner and T.S. Eliot have created great art around it. And yet, in spite of occasional outliers – John Mackenzie's prophetic thriller about Docklands-era neoliberalism *The Long Good Friday* (1980), William Raban's meditative and archivally rich *Thames Film* (1987), Patrick Wright's characteristically incisive television series *The River* (1999) – it has inspired strikingly little moving-image work of note. For the most part, it functions as a toothless retread of a Canaletto panorama, a picturesque backdrop to romcom sequences in which courting couples amble along the South Bank, a digi-graphic set of trad signifiers in tourist-board advertisements.

'Estuary', a new exhibition at the Museum of London Docklands, offers a counter-compendium that includes Raban's film, John Smith's *Horizon (Five Pounds a Belgian)* and Andrew Kötting's short *Jaunt*. Perhaps its centrepiece is *Portrait of a River*, a full-length work commissioned by the Museum of London and Film and Video Umbrella and directed by Danish-born London resident Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen. Like the other work in the show, it doesn't focus on iconic sites such as Tower Bridge or Waterloo Bridge so much as on the less conventionally photogenic realm of mudflats and salt marshes, oil tankers and roll-on/roll-off ferries. If the Thames itself is more commonly invoked than used – few Londoners sail on it to get to work – this part of it, winding through Essex all the way to the North Sea, a terrain for labour and industrial architecture rather than pleasureboats and gentle cruises, is especially foreign.

Larsen's film is divided into discrete sections that exacerbate this sense of strangeness. Most non-fiction depictions of the Thames – and riparian spaces more generally – proceed upriver or downriver, in linear fashion, in thrall to a barely examined notion of organic aesthetics that tends to treat nature as deterministic and inevitable. At the Docklands show, however, the running order of the individual segments is decided at random by a computer. This aleatory approach, not so far removed from



Old man river: *Portrait of a River*, part of 'Estuary' at Museum of London Docklands

the juxtapositions and chance encounters common on music-video cable channels or on YouTube, reformats the Thames into a river of fragments and chunklets. It prevents the viewer from falling into estuarine reverie; the challenge becomes to look for visual motifs or social concepts that cross-echo and resonate across apparently disparate water worlds.

Some of the most striking segments involve locations that are rendered otherworldly, almost abstract. In the Outer Estuary region, atop grey choppy waves that recall the protracted final sequence of Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, stands a wind turbine farm; the turbine arms move round mechanically like those of a disaffected aerobics instructor. Near Southend-on-Sea, colourful shapes drift and drag; they're kitesurfers who, in wide shot, resemble the ludic kinetics of avant-garde typography or dreamy sub-aquatic creatures in a Jean Painlevé film. A comic dimension emerges at Allhallows on the Hoo peninsula where, against a backdrop of platforms and flatlands, an amateur golfer tees off before casually walking out of the frame.

These segments rub up against ones more closely associated with oral history or socially marinated documentary of the kind with which Larsen has established his reputation. (343 *Perspectives* explores the meaning of community from the point of view of South Londoners living in neighbourhoods served only by the 343 bus;

*The familiar, perhaps overdocumented river can come to seem strange, fertile, full of imaginative possibilities*

*Portrait in Time* gives voice to residents of Chatham still struggling to cope with the closure of local dockyards 20 years earlier.) The work of a group dealing with seamen in distress is described, while the captain of an excursion vessel who has worked on the Thames for many decades laments the decline in the number of lighters – down from 6,500 in 1959 to a mere 62 in the present day.

For a moment, this incantation of loss – the Thames as a ghost river – suggests that Larsen's film might contribute to that body of work (strange television-film essays such as Chris Petit's *Weather* and Mark Harrison's slavery-informed *Sweet Thames; Another Water*, Roni Horn's photography book about the suicidal Thames; even Anja Kirschner and David Panos's apocalyptic *Polly II: Plan for a Revolution in Docklands*) in which the river is portrayed in terms of conflict, drowning and disaster as much as rebirth or liquid pastoralism. But that's counterposed by vignettes of boat-building courses for school drop-outs in Deptford.

For all its success at capturing the grey horizontals and dread skylines of the remoter fringes of the Thames, Larsen's most significant achievement might be in translating the currently fashionable concept of 'edgelands' – that mysterious, semi-wild, neither urban-rural interzone of obsolete factories and sewage-treatment centres that has also been the subject of John Rogers's *The London Perambulator* and Kieran Evans's excellent collaboration with Underworld's Karl Hyde, *The Outer Edges* – into hydro-poetic terrain. He makes a familiar and perhaps overdocumented river seem strange, fertile, full of imaginative possibilities. **S**

**i** 'Estuary' is at the Museum of London Docklands until 27 October. *Portrait of a River* also screens in the Thames Festival, 13 to 15 September



*Portrait of a River*



The Thames viewed from the Shard