By pushing clichés from all genres to the extreme, Lewis creates idiosyncratic imagery with a quirkiness that is engaging and often humorous.
out ‘more obsessive characters than that’. This is something he shares with Emir Morries, whose early films he has described as ‘wonderful’.
Lewis four-part series The Pursuit of Excellence (2003) focuses on people who have extreme and unusual passions. One of the parts in the series involves animals – in this case, ferrets whose owners show them. The other episodes explore the competitive worlds of synchronized swimmers, hair stylists and growers of giant pumpkins.

According to Lewis:

You should cast your documentary like you cast a feature film. … I thought there was an academic [in the film] I want to speak to all the academics. I spoke to hundreds of synchronized swimmers looking for the eight best characters.

‘Instinct and intuition’ guided his casting. He interviews people over the phone and records them. After speaking to the characters several times he will begin to write a script based on their stories and then ‘a storyboard starts to evolve’.

In the first clip Lewis screened in his presentation at the AIDC, taken from Cane Toads, a man with a pronounced stutter explains his reasons and methods for killing the toads. Lewis explained that he felt ‘he had a valid story to tell and it would have been just as discriminatory not to use someone with a stutter’. He said he hoped the audience ‘isn’t laughing at him … everyone has a different awareness of the character on the screen’. But he admitted that there is a ‘comic counterpart behind the seriousness’ of the interviewees and that the stutter was ‘used in the editing rhythm’.

Lewis’ subjects most often look directly into the camera lens, as do Morris’ – both filmmakers have developed unique mirror systems for achieving this. Lewis believes that this technique allows the viewer to become a receiver of information rather than a witness to a conversation.

Subjects frequently appear seated or standing in the dead centre of the frame, with the setting providing context, a sense of confined people live, who they are, their socio-economic background. In considering the importance and impact of framing, Lewis acknowledged that the idea came early on by Peter Greenaway’s 1980 made-for-television short documentary, Act of God, observing that ‘the headroom above the subjects who’d been struck by lightning suggested the risk of it happening again’.

Lewis appears to respect his animal subjects as much as he does his human ones. He believes animals ‘must be shot from an animal’s eyeline’. Cane Toads begins with very dramatic extreme close-ups of the toad’s eye, and when human beings finally make an appearance they are shot from below. At the time, this was a radical departure in nature film-making, with cinematographer Jim Frazier developing a special lens. The lens was later acquired by Panavision and named the Frazier Lens System after its inventor. The lens allowed Lewis to really tell the story ‘from the toad’s point of view’.

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION

Lewis enjoys irony. He introduced his film The Wonderful World of Dogs (1990) by informing the audience that ‘I hated dogs. I hated stepping on dog poo. I hated the fact that people had big dogs in small houses’. He is also a compulsive collector of facts and interesting stories that may become the springboard for a new project. He subscribes to a database called LexisNexis, which provides content from newspapers and other printed sources. He also utilizes word of mouth and newsgroups on the Internet.

He screened an excerpt in his presentation from The Wonderful World of Dogs consisting of a Chihuahua’s dream sequence, including the re-enactment of the dog’s rescue from the predatory beak of a pelican. It was based on a true story. Although in this case an actress played the role of the dog’s owner, Lewis prefers to have the real characters re-enact events from their lives. He explained:

Part of the charm is the liveliness of people being bad actors … You can salvage something that’s very limp – in a weird way. It gives it greater credibility … the people are real.

To illustrate the point later in the presentation, he used a clip from his 1998 film version of his A V Club novel, The Wonderful World of Dogs. It shows an apartment dweller’s home by rats was, this time, seen from the actual human victim’s point of view.

After the screening of The Wonderful World of Dogs, except a woman in the AIDC audience announced that she had herself witnessed exactly such an event, with the hysterical dog-owner pleading with the park ranger to kill the pelican so she could retrieve her (already swallowed) Chihuahua. Lewis responded, ‘Truth is stranger than fiction … you couldn’t make it up.’

Despite the humor in Lewis’ films, the deep research and more serious motivations are evident in every aspect. His feature documentary The Natural History of the Chicken begins with a dedication to ‘the renowned Italian Renaissance natural historian, Ulisse Aldrovandi, who perceived the chicken as part of a much larger order of things’.

MUSIC AS COUNTERPOINT

Sound and music both play very important parts in Lewis’ film-making. For Lewis, sound editor Walter Murch ‘is inspiring … my sound hero’. He cited Murch’s use of the ‘sound of a motorbike leaving to depict the feeling of desolation’ in The English Patient (Anthony Minghella, 1996).

I love sound. Even in real life, your vision is dictated by what you hear – the theatreal use of sound [through Foley and so on]. I work with editors who enjoy music. My wife does all the music selection for my films. She has a terrific ear.

Lewis finds that ‘the most dramatic use of music is when it is counterpoint, rather than parallel, to the image’, citing the use of Wagner’s music in The French Lieutenant’s Woman (Anthony Hopkins, 1981) and Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (Anthony Hopkins, 1979). He often prefers to use library music rather than dedicated composers, whom he perceives as tending to write parallel to the vision, ‘pulling out the violins when they see someone crying’.

There is an extraordinary moment in The Natural History of the Chicken: the sound of a choir singing ‘Agnus Dei’ underscores the luminous, cathedral-like vision of the interior of a massive factory farm, with thousands of chickens in a confined space. Text has informed the viewer that eight billion chickens will be slaughtered, and the total effect is evocative of genocide. And as for the power of silence, Lewis states, ‘You focus on the image when there is no sound.’

WORKING WITH ANIMALS

Lewis has said in the past that there are plenty of films about ‘A-list animals … tigers, elephants or lions’, but he is more interested in the ordinary animals whose lives are entwined with ours.

The more I learned about rats, the more I admired, respected and liked them. [In New York] you had ten times more chance of being bitten by another person than by a rat. It is an extraordinary animal.

Natural history, there have been challenges working with animals. The rats for RAT were trained by a special handler in Chicago and needed to be flown to New York, where the film was being shot. There were problems getting any airline to accept them as cargo, so in the end they were identified as ‘Rhodesian hammers’ and smuggled through. Working with animals has also sparked innovative solutions to filming problems. Asked how they filmed rats scurrying through pipes, Lewis explained the use of a miniature film camera that was strapped to a tube which followed the rodents into tiny spaces.

Animatious (2005) was Lewis’ response to a spate of films on the theme ‘when animals attack … and when animals go bad’. He wanted to show that ‘humans are stupid’ and injected the film with ‘bad science, because the broadcaster was expecting a natural science film’. On his web site he describes it as ‘a film about fate, co-existence, vanity, karma and forgiveness’.

One of the six stories derived from a newspaper article that had caught Lewis’ eye was in The New York Times (‘Rat Shoots Hunter’). The audience were treated to a clip showing the re-enactment of this event by the victim and his son.

The human figure appears and disappears in and out of the landscape in The Natural History of the Chicken. Could this be more than just an interesting visual device? Perhaps a metaphor for Lewis’ perception of the role we truly play in the world.

CALL ME CHICKEN

For the final clip in his presentation, Lewis chose to show the concluding sequence of The Natural History of the Chicken. This brought about a distinct change of mood compared to the previous clips. The sequence ‘Call me Chicken’ took about five days to shoot, with the chickens having been purchased and trained, the coop built and the environment where the story originally took place generally recreated. It was written, read and re-enacted by Pastor Joseph Turner – the owner of Liza, a chicken who offered up her own life to a hawk in order to save her chicks. In his essay, the Pastor reflects on the use of ‘chicken’ as a term of abuse, meaning cowardly, and says he would be proud to be called ‘chicken’. He recalls the Biblical phrase ‘no greater love’. Lewis said that there had been some opposition to the inclusion of this piece in the film. It was criticised as too religious and out of keeping with his somewhat sardonic style.

But typically, Lewis chose his own path, true to the meaning and intention of the film. We may not hear the narrator’s ‘voice of God’ in his films but we can certainly hear the voice of Mark Lewis, loud and clear.

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Endnotes

5 Mark Lewis, ‘Director Interview’, op. cit.
6 ibid.
7 Mark Lewis Radio Pictures, op. cit.

Endnotes