

Man's journey to settle the Earth on DVD

# Out of Africa

A promising BBC documentary emerges as a hotchpotch of mystery television and ethnic medley, filled out with curious freaks and gaudy effects.

There are definitely wiser ways to spend one's time than creating a primitive bamboo raft, which comprises of nothing more than a horizontal platform propelled by paddles shaped using stone tools. The Austro-Australian Robert Bednarik, one the world's most prominent experts for prehistoric rock art, canoed such a raft without technological aid, assisted only by a few native friends, across a stormy narrows a few years ago.



Bednarik has a penchant for doing things that aren't wise. In December 1998, he started his "First Mariners" project, making the epic voyage described above. Piloting an antediluvian bamboo raft, named Nale Tasih, he floated from Timor to Australia to investigate the Pleistocene origins of seafaring. Within 13 days, Bednarik travelled across 500 km of open sea, learning the hard way how prehistoric hominids crossed sea barriers

with the minimum of technology. Afterwards, the experimental palaeontologist described his experiences in a series of publications, with titles such as "An experiment in Pleistocene seafaring" (*Int. J. Naut. Arch.* (1998) 27(2): 139) and "Crossing the Timor Sea by Middle Palaeolithic raft" (*Anthropos* 95 (2000): 37).

## Experiments with a solid background

Bednarik's archaeological experiments are far from being based on a pipe dream. In fact, it's highly likely that over 850,000 years ago hominids did manage to cross the sea. These dangerous and complicated voyages must have occurred many times in history. Considering the rare fossils and stone tools that have been found in recent years, it is likely that *Homo erectus* had already left his African homeland 1.75 million years ago to spread through Europe and Asia in the following millennia. *H. erectus* remains that were found on the island Java, as well as near Beijing, in Heidelberg/Germany and elsewhere, support this hypothesis.

Strong evidence was provided twelve years ago that our large, brow-ridged and tool-using ancestor was indeed a seafarer who piloted, among others, the deep, fast-moving waters that separate most Asian and Australian faunas. In 1998, the Australian archaeologist Michael Morwood published the startling "fission-track ages of stone tools and fossils on the east Indonesian island of Flores" (*Nature* 392:173), indicating that *H. erectus* had colonised Indonesian islands at least 800,000 years ago (in 2003, Morwood discovered a possible species of extinct human, *H. floresiensis*, nicknamed "hobbits" on the same island, Flores).



By the way, these findings also mean that our ancestors' cognitive abilities were far more adaptable than is commonly believed. *H. erectus* must have been capable of devising complex strategies, as well as sophisticated technical handicraft and communication.

## A second exodus from Africa?

Even though our own genus, *Homo*, was probably as sophisticated as described, *H. erectus* and its successors were eventually doomed to extinction outside of Africa. How can that be, as the latest genetic research suggests that *H. sapiens* also originates from Africa? It's because we got a second chance. An additional exodus from the African continent began about 70,000 years ago and a tiny group of *H. sapiens* left the continent and went on to populate Asia, Australia and Europe. Out of interest, the so-called "multiregional origin of modern humans hypothesis" contradicts this and proposes that the one and only "Out of Africa" migration was carried out by *Homo erectus* and not by *Homo sapiens* two million years ago.

## Scientists portrayed as likeable freaks

Not all of this information is contained in the BBC series *The Incredible Human Journey*, published in a double DVD edition. This documentary is more a farrago of mystery TV with skin-deep popular science. We watch Robert Bednarik being painted by the local shaman while repeating his legendary journey of 1998 for the BBC in 2008. This voyage explored how hominids of the Lower Palaeolithic, up to a million years ago, might have succeeded crossing the seas at Ales Strait which separates Lombok from Sumbawa. Colonising populations must have traversed these waters before they could reach Flores, even fur- ►►

►► ther east, at least 840,000 years ago. Later, we meet Jeffrey Rose, a Kawasaki-driving heartbreaker with impressive tattoos on his muscle-bound arms, as he walks through the southern Arabian desert in vests, telling the viewer about his archaeological fieldwork (see adjacent photos).

The setting is sometimes even more ridiculous. Take, for example, the beginning of the episode “America”. For several minutes and accompanied by dramatic music, we watch a red helicopter flying over snowy mountains. We then meet a mountaineer dressed in red expedition clothes scaling an Alaskan glacier. From him we learn that one can easily break a leg here or be otherwise injured, a fall could be fatal, he once hung quivering in a crevasse and that this location is not free of danger, even with modern equipment. A moment later, we watch a native Canadian folklore event and hear “Chief Big Plume” talking about his tribe’s ancient myths of their origin. This time-consuming orchestration, needless off-the-topic filling about stuff that is already known, serves just one single purpose (meaningfully announced by the voice-over speaker): “Our quest is to find out how they did it.”

### As superfluous as a bra with three cups

However entertaining this may be for the uninformed, what has all this padding got to do with the dawn of mankind? All these impressions are as superfluous as a bra with three cups.

One would rather learn more about the science behind the colourful pictures, more about the mtDNA technique that scientists use to find the genetic relationships between present-day humans and how, consequentially, “all Americans alive today can be traced back to Northern Siberia”. One would like to hear from the men and women who have given their lives to researching human origins, more on the scientific background, the technology and methods used as well as the world wide find spots involved. An estimated 70 percent of the screen time is either redundant



Screenshots (2): BBC/Polyband

Jeffrey Rose, a research fellow at the Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity, University of Birmingham, is doing archaeological fieldwork in the southern Arabian desert. Cool tattoos, by the way.

or superfluous, thus leaving hardly an hour of more or less interesting information about *H. sapiens*’ emersion on the planet (this includes the descent from a group of around 200 who emerged from Africa by one particular possible route, the reaching of Australia via South Asia by sea, the arrival in America via the Bering land bridge and the increased importance of genetic methods).

All in all, *The Incredible Human Journey* is a prime example of a failed effort to communicate an extremely interesting topic. Less obtuse façade and more profound science would have provided a documentary worth watching.

WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD

- Alice Roberts, *The Incredible Human Journey*. 2 DVDs (English), BBC, 2009. 347 minutes, ca. €22.--.
- *Human Journey. Wie der Mensch die Welt eroberte*. 2 DVDs (English & German). BBC/Polyband, 2010. 250 minutes, ca. €16.--.

A stodgy interpretation of Darwin's "On the Origin of Species"

# Asthmatic Rooster, playing Video Games

The new extravaganza by Swedish pop duo The Knife scares main stream music listeners but enraptures electro pop and techno aficionados.

“Weird” is an inadequate way to describe what’s happening on the new album *Tomorrow, In A Year*, recently published by the Swedish synthpop duo The Knife. For example, track 7, called “Variation of Birds”, features an endless ear-battering digital alarm clock followed by an asthmatic rooster playing an arcade video game (*Cock-a-doodle-doo! – Eeeeeee!-Whack...jingle-jingle – Cock-a-doodle-doo!*).

Weird? You bet! Quirky? Definitely!

However, it gets worse. When listening to track 8, entitled “Letter to Henslow” – a flock of gagging electronic chickens suddenly mutates into barking cuckoos (*Beep-beep-beep-beep...woof-cuckoo-woof!*). The relaxing impression of idyllic grassland which follows in the “Schoal Swarm Orchestra” (track 9) only lasts a few moments before the illusion is broken by industrial noise that interferes with the shrill and screeching din of braking trains. Whew! A moment later, the “Colouring of Pigeons” might lead the unsuspecting listener to the conclusion that the singer is suffering from severe spasmodic hiccups.

## Darwin’s opus as a synthpop opera

While it’s quite evident that the 16 new songs by The Knife are anything but easy going, why should we review the album instead of, say, a textbook on biochemistry? The answers are quite simple. To begin with, *Lab Times* has a weakness for the unorthodox, and secondly, it’s about an issue that might very well be of interest to our readers. *Tomorrow, In A Year* is a musical translation of Charles Darwin’s magnum opus from 1859, *On the Origin of Species*.

Commissioned by the Danish performance theatre group Hotel Pro Forma, The Knife’s mastermind Karin Dreijer-Andersson wrote an electro-opera based on Darwin’s classic book in close collaboration with two Berlin-based artists of modern dance music. The opera had its debut at Copenhagen’s Royal Danish Theatre in September 2009, and performances followed in Gene-

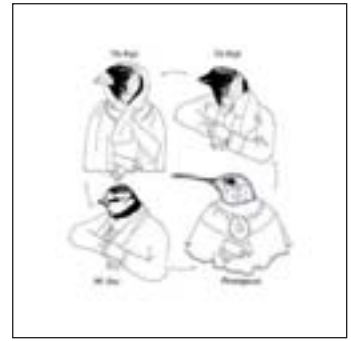
va (Switzerland), Dresden (Germany), and Århus (Denmark). At the same time, Dreijer Andersson and her brother, Olof Dreijer (aka The Knife), teamed up with three professional vocalists and the Icelandic percussionist, Hjorleifur Jonsson, to produce a 92-minute studio album version, which was released on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010.

## Difficult to digest in the beginning...

Against the light of the Darwinian background, Dreijer-Andersson’s stodgy tunes mutate into more plausible sound patterns. A good example is the CD’s first song, “Intro”. On a first listening, we hear little more than peculiar clicks and an odd noise that sound as if the CD’s audio track has been damaged. This “noise”, however, can also be interpreted as an aural version of the primordial soup – beginning with silence and developing into gently pearling drops of water (the “clicks”). A thunder storm (the “noise”) then approaches from afar to send flashes into the water, thus contributing the electric energy required to create organic compounds. Et voilà! – Stanley Miller’s pioneering experiment from the 1950s as a pop song!

In the following tracks we observe antediluvian amoebae crawling out of the loud speakers and we hear the mighty groaning of tectonic plates. All the while the Swedish born mezzo-soprano Kristina Wahlin sings her arias with a bell-like voice. Sometimes *Tomorrow, In A Year* sounds like a 1980s Jean Michel Jarre album played backwards and at others it

**Karin Dreijer-Andersson and Olof Dreijer may appear weird, but that’s nothing compared to the music they dream up.**



resembles a postmodern performance of acts like Kraftwerk, The Notwist or Laurie Anderson.

Other songs, however, are nearly “conventional” (but definitely gorgeous), such as the 11 minute opus “Colouring of Pigeons” and the balladesque “The Height of Summer”. Generally, one shouldn’t be too hasty about pressing the stop button, because most of the songs (such as “Seeds”; “Tomorrow in a Year”) only unveil their mystique after the last note has faded away.

All things considered, The Knife’s somewhat strange “evolution-set-to-music” might scare the archetypical rock music listener, but will enrapture music aficionados with a more open mind. WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD

The Knife, *Tomorrow, In A Year*. Double CD, Cooperative Music/Universal, 2010. €17.-- (Double CD), ca. €10.-- (MP3 download).

