

TV Review: Art of Scandinavia; Behind Closed Doors



Andrew Graham-Dixon began with Munch's icon of anguish, *The Scream*, in *The Art of Scandinavia* Mike Garner/BBC

James Jackson

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Andrew Graham-Dixon, now one of our best art broadcasters, covered pleasingly unfamiliar territory with his look at Nordic art

The Art of Scandinavia

BBC Four

★★★★☆

Behind Closed Doors

BBC One

★★★★☆

You can go back as far as the 6th century to read of the “Scandza” blues. The historian Jordanes wrote of a land where the sun didn’t shine for 40 days, and the people were as depressed as Eeyore on downers (I’m paraphrasing).

Fast-forward 1,500 years and the frozen climate of Scandinavia remains indelibly linked to its people’s reputed disposition of loneliness and melancholy. Surprised that Icelanders are the biggest users of antidepressants in the world? I doubt Andrew Graham-Dixon would be.

In **The Art of Nordic Angst**, the critic created, possibly, a television first — art history framed entirely within a psycho-climatic thesis. Where else to start but with Munch’s icon of anguish, *The Scream*, which he described as “a piercing unending scream running through all of nature itself . . . of feeling all alone in a hostile universe”? (Which I think is how Homer Simpson also interpreted it when he appeared in its parody.)

Yet aside from that anxiety attack, this covered pleasingly unfamiliar territory. Lars Hertervig was Norway’s Van Gogh; Peder Balke was so poor his family had to make bread from tree bark (luxury!). Venturing farther into ancient traditions, there were Viking ships, the philosophies of Kierkegaard, the Ibsen pickled-herring-and-absinthe diet.

Graham-Dixon now vies with Waldemar Januszczak as our best art broadcaster — WJ is blaring and batty, AGD is puppyish, only slightly batty. Fittingly, though, the scenery was as much the star here as anything. If, today, Scandi-creativity is better known for gentler forms of design (OK, and doomy TV thrillers), so the gloriously cinematic aerial shots of frigid, isolated vistas made explicit Graham-Dixon’s closing assertion that “the landscape is Scandinavia’s greatest museum”.

For Anna Hall’s documentary **Behind Closed Doors**, three female victims of domestic violence have bravely risked their safety by going on camera to talk about their situations as they testify against former partners. And you would have to watch a lot of TV before you see something as shocking as the opening scenes. Within two minutes of the 9pm watershed Hall’s camera offered the sight of Sabrina, petrified for her life, her face beaten so badly it looked like a horror-movie make-up job.

Another woman, Helen, while in a limbo of legalities, was terrorised by her abuser, Lawrence, via sickening voicemails (“I’m going to smash the living daylight out of you”, and worse).

How to feel? Revulsion at the perpetrators (being named and shown on camera felt no more than they deserve); exasperation at a judicial system that handed Lawrence a mere £1,000 fine; but frustration too at Helen, who had continued to meet Lawrence after the attack, jeopardising her safety and the case against him. Why? Hall attempted to make

some sense of the complexities of emotional dependency. Yet these remain very muddy waters.

In this paper on Friday Melanie Phillips hit a nerve among readers in spotlighting the extent of violence by women against men. This programme felt, by proxy, like a harrowing retort.

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