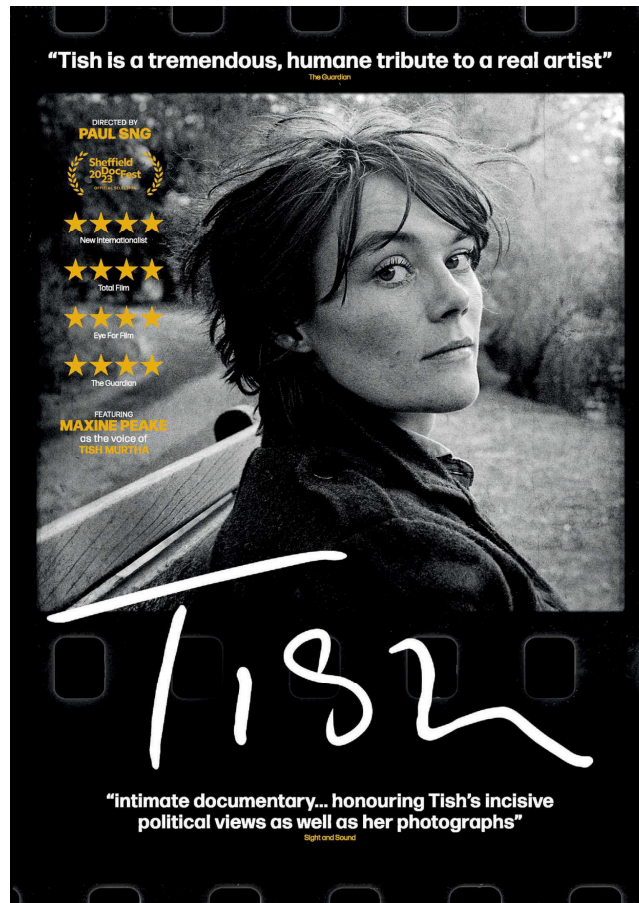


TISH



A FILM BY
PAUL SNG

90 mins / 2023 / English / United Kingdom



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FILM FESTIVALS

FESTIVAL OPENING NIGHT FILM – SHEFFIELD INTL DOC FESTIVAL, UK
WINNER NON BROADCAST FACTUAL AWARD – ROYAL TELEVISION SOCIETY
NORTH EAST AND BORDER AWARDS
AUDIENCE AWARD BEST DOCUMENTARY – LEEDS INTL FILM FESTIVAL, UK
DOCS IRELAND, IRELAND
THESSALONIKI DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL, GREECE
PHOTOMIDWEST FESTIVAL, USA
FILMBATH FILM FESTIVAL, UK

SYNOPSIS

Tish delves into the life and work of British photographer Tish Murtha, renowned for her poignant black-and-white images capturing the struggles of working-class communities in Northeast England during the 1970s and 1980s. Through the lens of her daughter, Ella Murtha, the film explores Tish's unwavering commitment to social justice and her efforts to shed light on the impacts of deindustrialization and austerity policies on her community. Despite facing personal hardships and professional marginalization, Tish's legacy endures, highlighting the power of photography as a tool for advocacy and change.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"Tish Murtha confronted the terror in our society to tell us how bad things were and how they were going to get worse. We wanted to make a film that reflects how incredibly courageous she was."

Paul Sng

Excerpted From the British Journal of Photograph

How do you make a documentary about a documentarian? Director Paul Sng talks about balancing image, sound and testimony in his film on Tish Murtha

When deciding whether to take on a project, director Paul Sng asks himself five key questions: What is the story about? Who is the audience? How are we going to tell that story creatively? Why now? What is my right to tell the story? If all have compelling answers, he starts thinking seriously about funding, casting, writing and assembling a team for the film. For Tish, Sng's 2023 documentary about the South Shields-born photographer Tish Murtha, the final question was the most important.

Murtha was a working-class photographer with a left-wing sensibility, whose pictures brought a shocking but poetic realism to life in England's deindustrialising north. Her legacy continues through the diligent curation of her daughter Ella, but her work remains less known than that of contemporaries such as Chris Killip and Graham Smith. What would it mean to animate Murtha's life – and pictures – at a time when the cycles of economic inequity and social deprivation are repeating?

Tish intersperses Murtha's photographs with interviews featuring her mentors Dennis Birkwood and David Hurn; friends Ethel Cass and Daisy Hayes; siblings Carl, Glenn, Mark and Eileen; and photographic contemporaries Mik Critchlow and Killip. Many of the conversations are anchored by Ella, who acts as an intermediary between her mother and the contributors, offering personal reflections which steer the narrative. Sng uses Murtha's photographs to illustrate her eviscerating political writings, creating a didactic force while showing the full scope of her practice, from Juvenile Jazz Bands to the lesser-known London By Night, a depiction of the lives of Soho sex workers.

Some of the most powerful moments in the film occur when Murtha’s siblings look back on their own lives in her images. Glenn describes their father sending the boys out to collect scrap metal, while the camera pans across a picture of a boy standing shrouded in smoke over a molten lead fire. The audience is seemingly caught between eras: the Dickensian poverty shown in the images on one hand and Glenn’s memories on the other, balanced by Sng in a single sequence.

Using a documentary format to tell the story of a documentarian presents a paradox. There are several artistic and social perspectives to contend with. “When you’re making a documentary, you’re beholden to the truth,” Sng explains. “Not just your truth – and the integrity of what you’re trying to say – but the participants that you’re working with.” Then there is the truth of the pictures, social conditions frozen in time. The British Chinese filmmaker drew inspiration from Murtha herself, he says. She made sure to give a print to all of her subjects, as much an act of courtesy as collaboration. “I try to at least spend a bit of time with someone before turning on the cameras,” Sng says. “Knowing that Tish did that informed our process and practice in terms of transparency.”

DIRECTOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Paul Sng is a bi-racial British Chinese filmmaker based in Edinburgh, making bold and creatively ambitious films about people who challenge the status quo. His work focuses on finding below the surface narratives to amplify lesser known and unheard voices that will connect emotionally with audiences across the world. He enjoys working with great teams to achieve high production values and deliver on budget and on time. Each project is driven by methodical research, creative storytelling and a collaborative approach that strives for equality, diversity and inclusion.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Director	Paul Sng
Producer	Jen Corcoran
Executive Producers	John Archer Ella Murtha
Narrator	Maxine Peake