

Tish [15]

2023 UK 90 mins

UK released **17 November 2023**

Director **Paul Sng**

Screenplay

Cinematography **Hollie Galloway; David Lee** (drama scenes)

Music **Alexandra Hamilton-Ayres**

Cast **Shin-Fei Chen** (Tish Murtha); **Maxine Peake** (Tish Murtha voice); **Ella Murtha** (as herself)

There's passion in this heartrending documentary from film-maker Paul Sng, comparable to his excellent earlier film about Poly Styrene, of X-Ray Spex. It is about the Tyneside photographer Tish Murtha who chronicled working-class lives in the north east in the 70s and 80s (and also those of Soho sex workers in London), earning for herself the nickname "Demon Snapper" in the papers.

She showed the reality of poverty and deprivation in communities where the misery of unemployment had been allowed to settle by the Westminster political classes who considered it a price worth other people paying for the boon of undermining trade union power. But in capturing the faces, particularly the faces of children, Murtha showed her subjects' humour, optimism and refusal to be cowed. The film is presented with enormous humanity and warmth by Murtha's grownup daughter Ella, who is an eerie likeness of her late mother. It is Ella who mediates the film's emotional message in talking to Tish Murtha's relatives and to her friends and teachers at the School of Documentary Photography in Newport.

The centrally important point is that Murtha was not an outsider: she was a part of the people whose lives she recorded, and resented the fetishisation of poverty by middle-class media folk. This was in fact the fateful cause of her split with the Side Gallery in Newcastle, which had been showcasing her work, because of what she called their "poverty is beautiful, maaan" attitude.

And the awful truth is that Tish Murtha became a statistic herself: marginalised and misunderstood by the arts establishment, she was in her final years reduced to poverty by Austerity Britain after the 2008 crash, terrified of being sanctioned by the Department of Work and Pensions. Sng and Ella Murtha tell the gripping tale of a kid who like her brothers and their mates roamed far and wide along the deserted streets and derelict, abandoned houses, discovering a camera in one – and finding her vocation. She also discovered that having a camera deterred the kerb crawlers and child abusers who would creep along beside them. She bought a new camera on hire purchase from Dixons, got a college place (with the help of a grant, presumably) and her talent blazed away, with her eloquent commentary appended to the images. The Side Gallery was her supporter for a while and London's Photographers' Gallery commissioned the Soho study. But this film tells a story very like Clio Barnard's film *The Arbor*, about the Bradford dramatist Andrea Dunbar – like Dunbar, Tish Murtha was a brilliant working-class talent who enjoyed early success but did not have that aspirational infrastructure of upward mobility to maintain a long-term career, which her middle-class male contemporaries enjoyed and took for granted, and like Dunbar, the pressure on her physical and mental health was not cushioned by these advantages. The other film which this film reminded me of, inevitably, was Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake*, about Austerity Britain. Tish is a tremendous, humane tribute to a real artist.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2023

Coming soon....

Monday 12/2: *Totem*

Wednesday 14/2 1pm: *Klimt: The Kiss*

Monday 12/2: *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*

For details and more – visit our website

www.buxtonfilm.org.uk

Buxton Film is a Registered Charity no. 1165040

 admin@buxtonfilm.org.uk  [@buxtonfilm](https://twitter.com/buxtonfilm)