



A SUNDAY IN HELL (En Forårsdag i Helvede)

Director: Jørgen Leth

Starring: David Saunders, Roger De Vlaeminck, Marc Demeyer

Denmark, 1977, 1 hour 51 minutes, Danish, French, Italian, Dutch + English subtitles

Cycling is better for the planet (which explains why some cyclists can be unbearably pious and holier-than-thou). And we are driven (or rather not driven) by an increasing concern for own health. A cycle a day keeps the doctor away. Always assuming you keep out of the way of buses.

It's ironic, therefore, that in its extreme form, cycling – as in the case of Tom Simpson – can kill you.

Sunday in Hell draws attention to the sheer suffering, the pain and anguish of cycling. The Paris-Roubaix course itself is designed to make life extremely difficult for the contestants.

Half of it is on normal tarmac. But for the other half the riders are siphoned off across country on tracks that are, technically, "pavés", consisting of ancient cobbles, good only for farmers and cattle, and completely unsuitable for the wafer-thin wheels of racing bikes. Punctures and crashes are normal.

In the film, many riders are seen covered in blood, or inert in a ditch. The ambulance is never far behind the riders. The documentary speaks of the "inferno" and a "merciless elimination process" in which only the fittest and luckiest survive.

However cutting edge the technology, there is always an archaic, nostalgic, primitivist element to cycling. And an "essential madness" too (in Fotheringham's words). It's a race that is so insane, that it practically forces you to cheat.

"You shake your head at how popular it's become," says [William] Fotheringham. He lives in rural Herefordshire. Recently he was helping a farmer move hay bales, when the farmer turned to him and started asking for news of Wiggins and Chris Froome. "I used to be the weirdo in my family. Now I have so many relatives who are cycling buffs."

...I was struck, watching the film, by the high degree of earnest machismo. This is a race strictly for guys. Tight shorts and funky caps. And De Vlaeminck who looks like a slightly anorexic Mel Gibson.

There is a hilarious scene at the end of the film where the race survivors are all crowding into the vast collective shower room of the Roubaix velodrome, moreover surrounded by their fans and entourage and media. I find it hard to describe this as "homoerotic". Zerotic maybe.

But there is another scene in a café where a woman spectator is being asked what it is she likes about cycling. She is stumped. So the interviewer asks, "Is it the men?" "Yes, men," she says with a laugh. There is a controlling, pushily patriarchal side to the rural French café. Women are only allowed in to admire the men.

Abridged from interview with William Fotheringham by Andy Martin, **The Independent**, April 2018