

May 5, 2014

HUFFPOST LIVING CANADA

Documentaries May Be Cool, But They Aren't Making Money

Posted: 05/03/2014 11:41 am

[Like](#) 1,507 people like this. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

You know it's spring in urban Canada when you see hipsters lining up in the rain, with their grandmothers, to see a documentary. In Montreal they're at RIDM (Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montreal), in Vancouver at DOXA and in Toronto at Hot Docs, the biggest doc fest in North America and the most important in the world. For audiences and doc makers alike, these festivals are illuminating and energizing, if somewhat bittersweet.

The sweetness comes from their ballooning tickets sales and what that means. In two decades, Hot Docs has grown from a small academic seminar into a ten-day festival that last year sold 180,000 tickets and gave away another 72,000 to students. But even stronger proof of documentaries' popularity is the success of the new Bloor Hot Docs Cinema, the only theatre in the world dedicated to the art of documentary. Since opening two years ago it has exceeded all audience projections.

This is the universe as it should be. Documentary is the only (non-aboriginal) artform indigenous to Canada. The first documentary -- Nanook of the North -- was made here. John Grierson, who coined the term "documentary," established the National Film Board of Canada, in 1939, as the world's first film studio dedicated to the form. For many decades documentary was an institutionalized part of our national discourse.

Generations of tweedy men and women in sensible shoes made it their profession, either at the NFB or within broadcasting, both public and private. Governments, federal and provincial, funded documentary production and made showing it a condition of TV licenses. Canadian documentary makers are still considered among the most intrepid and innovative in the world. That their work is beloved enough to bring Canadian 20- and 60-somethings together every year, in the rain, is sweet indeed.

The bitter part of the tale is that documentary has never been harder to finance in this country and Canadian documentary makers are scrambling to stay alive. The governmental and broadcast supports that have underwritten it for generations have been pretty much knee-capped. But you'd never know that to read the roster of Hot Docs sponsors. It includes all levels of government, every substantial media company and some of the country's biggest corporations. Officially, documentary is supported by the Establishment for the very reason that audiences love it: documentary exists to inform, challenge, shock and delight its audiences in equal measure; its *raison d'être* is to investigate the wonders, challenges and problems of individuals and societies in all their contradictory complexity. And all of that is generally assumed to be good for the body politic.

Of course, like good text journalism, documentaries are fated to bump up against power, be it government or commercial. But just as wise kings employed fools for the telling of uncomfortable truths, genuine democracies accept the telling of hard reality to be a necessary function. Because democracy relies on an informed and engaged citizenry. Right? So nobody, officially, is not for that. Having your logo on a documentary festival is as apple pie as supporting a cure for cancer.

But, actually, for the last decade or so, Canadian governments and broadcasters have been quietly withdrawing all support for documentary. Commercial television, now concentrated in the hands of a few megacorps, does its shareholder diligence by playing strictly to the cheap seats; its screens are filled with sporting fights, gun-toting men, bouncing breasts and dancing cats. Federal governments, increasingly influenced by neo-liberal doctrine, have been shrinking the NFB and CBC for a generation now while refusing to enforce license conditions which might force TV to create a little public parkland within the malling of our mindscapes.

Sure, there are bright spots: occasionally a principled broadcast executive will find a way to get a documentary made. And we still have some docs on public television thanks to a few provincial governments. But mostly, the non-fiction landscape in Canadian media culture is dim.

If you like to ascribe motives, you might see this as part of the neo-liberal agenda. On the left, it's generally believed that the dumber the public is, the better things go for neo-liberal politicians and their corporate backers. See Rob Ford. I don't know if the Establishment actually thinks that's true, but, if they do, I'd think by now they are starting to realize that they have shot themselves in the loafer.

In any case, the public-private entanglement that is Canadian television now actively discourages documentary. I say "discourages" because this ain't about money. An average 30-second commercial has the budget of the average feature documentary. One episode of any flashy cop or medical serial would make 10 feature documentaries. And it's certainly not about the wise expenditure of public monies. A bad doc still serves the civic enterprise if only by recording a place and time. A bad flashy cop serial is just a big waste of money and, in Canada, that's usually, mostly public money.

What's amazing -- and obvious at all the doc fests -- is the effect the situation has had on the funding and practice of documentaries. Drowned out of the mainstream, documentary has reemerged in cinemas and on the net as a different and more powerful beast... though not always a better or more useful one.

When I first started making docs more than 30 years ago they were the leafy green vegetables of our media diet. Everybody respected documentary, but they were a taste adults acquired with maturity, not something young people yearned to consume. Today, the panicky looks on young people in the standby line at Hot Docs tell you how keenly they believe there's something important going on inside that they've just got to be part of. And millennials not only want to see docs, they want to make them. Documentary programs in the country's film schools are stuffed and every year the business delegates at Hot Docs have hotter threads, neater beards and better shoes. Every year the festival also has more celebrities, as even Hollywood stars crowd into the documentary space.

Repression of documentaries has almost made them contraband, and therefore so much more desirable. Of course. The

stupidifying of the mainstream makes intelligent alternatives cool. This must be how it felt to be a poet in Eastern Europe in Soviet days, when bards in the West had already given up and resigned themselves to teaching English. Repression always makes the art glow stronger.

But cool does not mean flush. In Canada, a growing crowd of doc makers are competing for the few remaining scraps of money. Yet that has not stopped production. In lieu of Establishment support, doc makers have devised their own strategies. Technological developments have given them cheap tools -- anyone with a smart phone and lap top can make a doc now. But the real revolution is in financing. Crowd funding through the net is now one of the most likely ways to raise documentary production funds. It is hugely inefficient and does not yield great sums -- but it's often enough to get a doc made. The documentary about Internet martyr Aaron Swartz, which opened Hot Docs, was made this way.

Often tied to crowd-funding is the explicit linking of documentaries to social activism. Many filmmakers have come to believe that the very purpose of documentaries is to motivate social change. Their crowd-funding pitches typically reflect this and often draw the bulk of their donations from people already committed to the championed cause. These days, if you want to make a doc in Canada, your best bet is a plea on a web page with a PayPal account and a picture of Stephen Harper sprouting horns.

Documentary has always been linked to social justice and activism. This year's Hot Docs is dedicated to the late, beloved Peter Wintonick, who was widely admired for his contribution to many social justice docs. Peter is best known for co-directing *Manufacturing Consent*, a bio of the American progressive intellectual Noam Chomsky. A related figure is Barbara Kopple, whose 1976 film *Harlan County USA*, about a Kentucky coal miners' strike, is screening at the festival. Both films are concerned with social justice but both are remembered because they are spectacular works of craft which provide the opportunity to see the world in a new way.... not because of the purity of their dogma or any measure of their impact on society.

Such impacts do happen. An *Inconvenient Truth* put climate change on the global agenda. *Sharkwater*, a documentary about the heinous practice of shark finning, has been important in getting shark fin soup banned in many places. I like to think my own film *Waterlife*, about the Great Lakes, has had some influence on recent government moves to protect them. When we released the film we connected viewers through the web to various environmental groups, because the first question after the screening of any environmental film is always: "what can we do?" I don't know if anyone ever used those links. But I know for sure the film does not tell them to do that or anything else; does not make any recommendations at all. That's not our job. Our job is to use our journalistic and artistic skills to try to frame the world anew. The reaction part is your job, using the political process if appropriate.

No media worker with any sense thinks their work is free of bias. It may or may not be intended, may originate in our class, gender, race or even just our technological means of telling a story. But it's always there. One of the harder parts of the job is trying to get past yourself, to see -- and portray -- what is actually going on.

Democratic politics is all about moving crowds and every aspect of it turns on the degree to which various players lead or follow. The history of journalism is full of examples of publishers trying to move crowds, with results both good and ill. But the history of journalism has no examples of reporters renowned for their ability to convince people to do things. Great journalism may result in social, political or legal reform. But great journalists have always been respected for what they revealed, not for what they preached.

The power to reveal requires independence. In news organizations, independent reporters are protected by editors and publishers. There's always professional debate, but also the underlying agreement that the final governor of what gets published is the journalists' best approximation of the truth. Likewise, independent documentary makers have been protected by their institutional and broadcast partners. What audiences just call 'documentaries' are known in the trade as "POV" -- point of view -- documentaries. There are regulations in this country that spell out in detail what that means. Their essence is not that the films make any point at all, but that the "viewpoint" of the film will be in the control of its makers. The idea is to guarantee independence of thought. In editing rooms, as in newsrooms, the system does not always work perfectly or even honestly. But it's like common courtesy, everyone knows the rules, even if they sometimes ignore them.

What I fear about crowd funding and the absolute valorization of documentary's social impact is, obviously, the danger of falling into propaganda. I know in the digital age it's fashionable to believe in the wisdom of crowds. And democracy, of course, relies on it. But we have plenty of evidence to prove that crowds are often imbecilic mobs pushed and pulled by magical thinking. There are now academics developing metrics to gauge the impact of specific documentaries on their audiences' post-screening behavior. I'm sure these people's hearts are in the right place, but there is much about that I find chilling.

Journalists speak of colleagues captive to their subjects -- blindly regurgitating what some informant, usually political, is telling them... for fear of challenging it and losing out on scoops. It's as bad, maybe worse, to be captive to telling a group what its members think they want to hear. I don't say that must happen, nor that all documentary makers who use crowd-funding will lack the integrity to truthfully follow stories as they unfold. I say merely that I'd be sad to see a generation of documentary makers who could only do their job by going go cap-in-hand to the crowd. And I would be appalled to see one wherein they had to prove their ability to move a crowd to be able to make documentaries. It is enough that we have traditionally been judged by our ability to "draw eyeballs." That's a challenge a writer, filmmaker or artist can (grudgingly) live with, because the desire to be heard is inherent in speaking. But to be judged by our ability to incite... well, that's entering a whole other realm. The best you can say is that that way lies a career in advertising. But, since we are talking about incitement to political action, you must acknowledge the worst and recall the old and strong relationship between propaganda and crimes against humanity.

Anyway you slice it, I don't see how the populace-enlightening job of documentaries -- upon which we have all already agreed (see our list of corporate sponsors) -- is improved by forcing doc makers to bow to the crowd.

To be clear, I am not criticizing the desire of documentarians -- especially young ones -- to widen people's perspectives and, thus, improve the world. The foundation of that passion is a belief in human reason, compassion and capability. It is what motivates teachers and scientists too and it is always a joy to behold. Peter Wintonick used to joke that the trade-off for pursuing reality was that all documentary makers must take "a vow of poverty." The young people now flocking toward documentary know that and they flock nonetheless. I can only cheer and admire them for that when the neo-liberal establishment tells them again and again that greed always wins and that it is morally A-OK.

And it's fun to see them empowered to take on that establishment. The passion to do that has never burned brighter in our community. Locked outside the gates, doc makers all the more readily identify with all the others -- from environmentalists to poverty activists -- who neo-liberalism has branded as enemies.

When I was a young reporter we were always keen to kick at power, but it was not as ideologically or intellectually simple then because the establishment was biodiverse. It included merchants, manufacturers, unions, bureaucrats, news barons, the military, universities, science, the banks, and more. In those days, before neo-liberalism caught fire, financial speculators were hardly even at the table. Today the speculators rule the neo-liberal establishment and govern by the cruelest capitalist logic. And so there is no hesitancy among the young to bash at that with all the ferocity they can muster. It's a delicious irony that the establishment's discouraging of documentary has only fanned its flame.

So it's fun to watch... until someone puts an eye out. This new establishment, it seems to me, is dark and merciless. I worry for the safety of the young going up against it. But I worry more for their psyche as documentarians and for the potential impact on our craft. Call me an old coot, but I do not believe it is our job to be swords. It is our job to be lightbulbs.

But I do take great heart from knowing that the impulse to document our world will not be starved, stifled or stopped. If people are lining up in the rain to see documentaries it is not just because they will never see them in the privacy of their own homes -- it's because they understand that the perspectives they are being denied are worth getting soaked for.

I'm sure it is greatly cheering to Grierson's ghost as he hovers over them, seeing them put up with weather just to, as the Bloor's slogan says, "escape to reality." How perfect, really, that this should be the milieu of our national artform. For maker and audience alike, just by surviving the current climate, documentary has grown stronger. And that is something any Canadian should appreciate, especially in the spring.

MORE ON HUFFPOST:

Loading Slideshow