

# Why Documentaries Matter - Doc Summit 2008

**Why Documentaries Matter** A Talk by Tom Perlmutter Delivered to the **NFB Hot Docs Doc Summit** April 25, 2008

Welcome to the 5th annual **Hot Docs NFB Doc Summit**. Today various presenters will speak about important policy issues that affect the structure and methods by which documentaries are produced. The subjects include terms of trade, C-10 and equity. This kind of debate is certainly vital to maintain a vibrant documentary culture. But I want to take a few minutes to step back - and give a context for why we should even care about such things. I want to talk today about why documentaries matter.

This may seem self-evident given the enduring popularity of the form and the important window on the world that documentaries have revealed to audiences globally. Over the last fifteen years there has been a veritable explosion of specialty channels built on various forms of documentary and factual programming-Discovery Channel, Canal D, History Television, the Documentary Channel. Documentary has become an accepted, if still niche, part of the feature film world. The remarkable success of this festival is testimony enough to the vitality of the documentary. But sometimes what is most obvious needs to be the most questioned. Popularity does not necessarily mean that something matters. I do believe documentaries matter, and I believe they matter for reasons that are not so self-evident. I want to look at a particular kind of documentary and make an argument for why it is the beating heart of what the form is about. This is the visionary documentary, the documentary as cinema, the documentary created by an auteur filmmaker who has rendered the real into image by force and virtue of the imagination.

It is the kind of work that we aspire to at the NFB and that we deliver when we are at our best. Its roots lie in the Griersonian injunction to use "art as a hammer," an art that is a creative engagement with actuality.

The actuality that I am speaking about is not the news or current affairs programming like *The Fifth Estate* that may sometimes call their work documentaries. Their intent is to inform, to uncover what may be hidden, to determine the facts of the case, whatever they may be. The facts are what remain important at all times. The facts take precedence over narrative, over emotional appeal, over the characters represented in the piece even though all of these elements in various proportions may be important in how the work is presented.

The actuality that I am speaking about is also different from what is now

commonly called "factual entertainment" like *Survivor*, *Project Runway*, *Big Brother* or *The Biggest Loser*. These are a particular mix of game show and soaps whose intent is fundamentally melodramatic. They lack the reportorial factuality of current affairs or the sub-text and resonance of the documentary. Let me be clear that I am not in any way denigrating the form. These are great inventive genres of popular culture and a necessary part of how living cultures are formed and remain dynamic.

But if that is all that we had-the factual and the melodramatic-we would as a society feel, even if we couldn't name it, a profound sense of absence. We would feel that something was missing. We might even feel, in some indefinable way, that we had been cheated. The lack would be a very real one: it would be the absence of meaning.

The actuality that I am speaking about-the documentary as a work fully informed by the point of view of a creator, a filmmaker-is driven by meaning. At its heart is a moral point of view about the sanctity of the individual human being and the significance of the just life in human society. Politically, it can cover the spectrum from right to the left, but they will share this unbending commitment to meaning.

The documentarian "bears witness." To bear witness is to see and to name. This is not a simple kind of seeing and naming. This is not the seeing and naming of the reading primer: Look, Jane, look. See Spot run. It is an imaginative seeing, a seeing of vision, a re-visioning that pushes to an authentic re-naming. What has been seen can no longer be unseen; what has been named can no longer be obscured.

To see is to engage; to see is to enter into a profound relationship with that which is seen; to see is to learn how to see. Here is the paradox of imaginative seeing. To truly see requires a complete anchoring in the being of the creator who sees, yet the very act of seeing alters the creator, who will never see in the same way again. The imaginative act is to risk oneself totally in the seeing. The imaginative being will be radically challenged by the act of seeing. It is that challenge that becomes the explosive material on the screen.

The same is true, in a different alchemic reaction, for the audience-that's where the power of the documentary lies. I, the viewer, in a most perfect and complete engagement with the work, recreate that dangerous journey of creator and put myself at risk. We all expose ourselves; we all become Sauls on the road to Damascus.

Most cultures have two grand expository traditions. The first is the narrative one. Homer's *Odyssey*, the novels of Dickens and Tolstoy, the feature films of Coppola and Cronenberg form part of this great flow of

narrative work. As early as the 4th century BC Aristotle laid out the basic laws for narrative form-of which all the film courses and handbooks on screenwriting and story are but variants.

In this tradition what matters above all else is story; it trumps every other consideration. It may borrow the conventions of documentary, as in works by Gus Van Sant (*The Elephant*), Peter Berg (*The Kingdom*), Paul Greengrass (*Flight 93*) and many others, but those conventions remain and will always remain subservient to delivering the story.

The documentary, too, has a great allegiance to story. Narrative structure matters, matters crucially. The first question any documentary professional will ask about a project is: what is the story?

Yet, at the end of the day, story is not the essential thing of the documentary, and the documentary does not fall into that great narrative stream I spoke about. It finds its place in the second of the two great expository movements of cultural creation: the prophetic tradition. Not prophetic in the sense of soothsaying or fortune telling. We do not go to documentaries as we do to our daily horoscope. The documentary is prophetic in an Old Testament kind of way: the thundering denunciation of social injustice (***Triage*** or ***Le peuple invisible***); the admonishments of disaster if we do not mend our ways (***Manufactured Landscapes***, ***An Inconvenient Truth***); the confronting of the powerful (***Confessions of an Innocent Man***, ***Fog of War***); the courage to uphold the human (***Up the Yangtze***, ***Born into Brothels***).

The documentarian is motivated by moral outrage. That is why documentaries most often deal with subject matter that makes us uncomfortable or exasperated or angry or profoundly sad. But the documentarian is also motivated by visionary passion. Because if the documentarian holds up a mirror to reflect the world as it is, it is also a magic mirror that, implicitly, reflects how the world could be. How it should be. Better. Transformed.

So prophetic in a lyrical way too: gazing in delight at the world about us (***Winged Migration***); reflecting on the possibilities of the human (***Spellbound***) and celebrating boundless creativity (***Buena Vista Social Club***). This too is the documentary, the documentary that transports us into realms of wonder.

Prophetic, too, in the manner of William Blake, artist, poet, visionary-Blake, who proclaimed that "imagination is not a state; it is human existence itself"; Blake, whose visions were an expression of an acute, detailed reading and denunciation of the forces of oppression of his day. Blake, whose images and words haunt and inspire us to this day. Blake,

who today may have turned to the documentary as his medium of expression.

In this country we have made the documentary our own particular form of cinematic expression. You might say we have a national genius for it. Part of it may have to do with the unique social experiment that Canada is.

In his book on Canada, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, John Ralston Saul writes, "Canada's strength-you might even say what makes it interesting-is its complexity; its refusal of the conforming, monolithic nineteenth-century nation-state model. That complexity has been constructed upon three deeply rooted pillars, three experiences-the aboriginal, the francophone, the anglophone." Today, there is a fourth pillar-our diverse population. Canada is in the process of articulating a profound, complex, nuanced sense of an evolving country, with a very different notion of the nation state; a truly revolutionary notion of a multi-identified peoples anchored in common civic, democratic values.

In that way Canada may be more the revolutionary aspiration that Blake cried out for in his great prophetic work, *America*. If that is the case, then it is no wonder that documentary becomes a national mode of imaginative expression. Documentary is, by virtue of its ethics, its methods of operation and its creative engagement with actuality, at the leading edge of social transformation. I will add that no cultural institution has taken to heart that truth and given it its fullest expression as has the NFB.

So that's why documentaries matter. Not only do they matter. They are essential. In the cultural arena they are the anchor points of vision and meaning. That is where their value lies. And even if they do not have the audience reach or the box office potential of the narrative tradition-well neither did the prophets. Our documentarians may be voices crying in the wilderness, but as long as we have those voices we have hope.