



IN TOUCH WITH REALITY

DOCUMENTARIES TAKE ON A NEW GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Documentaries: a road less traveled by filmmakers and a trail less frequented by audiences. While often sidelined, documentaries are becoming more popular as global perspectives are changing and the need to capture real life stories is gaining impetus.

Al Gore and Michael Moore have raised the profile of documentaries garnering worldwide attention and accolades. However, industry watchers wonder if the cult of personality is necessary for the genre. Canadian audiences have always had a craving for documentaries. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Hot Docs is the largest international documentary festival in North America and the second largest in the world. The festival, which takes place every spring, started as an artist-conceived event founded by a group of producers and has grown beyond the founders' wildest expectations.

For Italian director Vittorio Moroni, Hot Docs is one of the most important documentary festivals in the world. He finds that Toronto's

audiences are well prepared for documentaries. Fortunately for Moroni, his documentary, *Licu's Holidays*, is going to have a theatrical release in his country. "I am happier doing documentaries because I can keep in contact with reality and it is also an opportunity to know something new," says Moroni. His film explores the journey of a Bangladeshi man settled in Rome who travels back home to get married. What ensues is beyond Licu and the crew's imagination as he tries to arrange his marriage and negotiates between tradition and modern life. As an Italian in Bangladesh, Moroni found arranged marriages very strange and the long negotiation process even more bizarre. The film took almost three years to make as the crew follows Licu from Rome to Bangladesh and back. Moroni decided to take Licu's journey beyond the holidays and also examines his life after marriage. Several cultural disparities emerge as Moroni turns the lens on the life of a Bangladeshi woman living in Italy under the rules of her husband. Moroni explores the contradictions in Licu's personality as the life story of a common man emerges with many twists and turns.

Commenting on the role of filmmakers like Moore and Gore, Moroni finds that "it is helping documentaries get more attention but those kinds of films are so full of political questions that it is becoming more difficult for other kinds of documentaries to be distributed. Audiences in Italy expect that style, and it is difficult to distribute normal stories."

Sean Farnel, international programmer at Hot Docs, is of the view that it's better that documentaries avoid the cult of personality, meaning the films and the stories get most of the attention, rather than the personalities behind them. Talking about the lack of momentum for this genre, Farnel shares his perspective, "Every year there are a few docs that cross-over into mainstream awareness. For instance, last year it was *An Inconvenient Truth*, or previously films like *March of the Penguins*, *Super Size Me*, or *Bowling for Columbine* gained wide recognition and appreciation. However, things like 'buzz' and 'limelight' require more than interesting stories and subject matter; they require millions of dollars in marketing and publicity expenditures. The economics of documentary

culture make it difficult for many of these films to cut through the marketing and publicity clutter. The fact that the Hot Docs audience increased by 33 percent this year indicates that, economics aside, these films are capable of creating their own limelight and buzz.”

Producer and filmmaker, Lalita Krishna is the co-chair of the Toronto chapter of the Documentary Organization of Canada that started Hot Docs. Krishna was fortunate to have her very first independent documentary premiere at Hot Docs. “This opened many doors for me and helped ease my entry into the world of independent production,” she says.

Citing several reasons why documentaries do not have the same profile as features Krishna says, “The outlet for documentaries are mostly television and festivals whereas features have a theatrical release and bigger audiences in order to make some revenue.”

According to Farnel, Hot Docs provides a platform to filmmakers globally and serves as a gateway for many documentaries to gain theatrical or other forms of distribution, broadcast, licenses or invitations to other festivals.

Krishna talks about challenges producers face in Canada: “One is the diminishing windows for broadcast of documentaries. CBC, who used to have many dedicated slots, has cut back severely. Many of the commercial networks have pulled out of screening docs. But there are broadcasters like OMNI who are actually helping create a new audience for documentaries through their support of third-language documentary production. This has not only helped new producers enter the field, but it has also fostered a whole range of stories which would otherwise never have been told,” she says.

The 2007 Hot Docs festival presented 129 films in eleven days to an astounding audience of 68,000. Additionally, a record number of industry delegates, close to 2000, participated in the numerous initiatives offered during the Festival’s conference. The Toronto Documentary Forum, Hot Docs’ key market event, also had a banner year.

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Krishna, who attended the festival and the forum, says, “This year there was a pitch at the Toronto Documentary Forum by a director from India. The subject was 'Love in India' and he wanted to examine the double standards that co-exist in India—the land of the Kamasutra, which has taught the art of love-making to the world and yet arrests people for holding hands or displaying affection in public. It was ironic that Richard Gere was charged a week later for kissing the actress Shilpa Shetty in public!”

In contrast, talking about the visibility of Michael Moore and Al Gore, Krishna says, “The jury is out on whether or not it has been all good for the genre. Michael Moore’s style has made people wary of producers and Al Gore—he’s done a lot to raise profile for the environment...but documentaries have always been about social issues, so why do we need someone of such high profile to make people pay attention?” *ANOKHI*

Next year’s fest: April 17-27, 2008.

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