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Documentaries Feature Big at GNATM and OSRF

By Kim Skene, Program Manager, Tom Thomson Art Gallery



Still from the documentary *Watermark*

Ah, the much maligned Documentary. Nerdy nephew to the Big Blockbuster, the documentary at one time could be categorized into “talking heads”, nature films or travelogues. Stemming from what was called in the early days, the “newsreel tradition”, the actual practice of making a documentary film innocently conveyed the notion of truth and reality. Then, along came the “new-age” hybridizations like the docudrama, docufiction and reality TV. No topic is too sacred, too controversial or too mundane for the documentary film maker – inquiring minds always want to know. Clever filmmakers realize that the genre is fully self-aware and that contemporary audiences can be both savvy and naive. In a time when every single one of us can “document” the world around us with the small device that we ubiquitously tote in our pockets or purses, and raw data can be easily viewed in just a finger swipe, is there still an audience for the documentary film? I would answer of course with a resounding yes!

Good stories are good stories, and sometimes the real talking heads hold as much, or more, poignancy than any Oscar-worthy professional performance. And a good story teller is a good story teller. Within an interview, a filmed subject can be the auteur of his own truth or the unreliable narrator of his own tale. Quiet heroes are sung like Rodriguez in *Searching for Sugar Man*, and villains reviled like the fast food industry in *Super Size Me*. Tears are shed and applause thunders for young ballroom dancers, for senior bodybuilders, for paper clip tributes to Holocaust survivors and for the Dixie Chicks. Presumptions and directions can change mid-movie, (have you seen *The Armstrong Lie?*) and all good stories have odd little twists along the way like Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell*. Real people can certainly be “real characters”. Did you know that there is a real Burt behind Burt’s Bees? Spoiler alert - Rodriguez is alive and singing! And was a Canadian ambassador more spy than diplomat? Several entertaining films can answer these intriguing questions, but it’s the humanity in these narratives, and in their presentation, that intrigues and captures us.

For many of us, our first exposure to the “documentary” was probably Sunday evening television and the *Wonderful World of Disney*, or *Lorne Green’s New Wilderness*. Green narrated many NFB documentaries over the years (a news broadcaster in his early career, the CBC nicknamed Green “The Voice of Canada”). Who didn’t want to listen to that voice (or to Morgan Freeman’s today)? Soothing baritone voice-overs gave words to a story that we absorbed from small screen sights and sounds. Grand vistas of untamed lands and the antics of wild animals were captured on film just for us. We learned about far off countries and cultures...we travelled in our easy-chairs, all while being entertained.

Today's docs are certainly more sophisticated, but that thirst for knowledge and entertainment can still be quenched by the documentary film more than any other format.

Good camera work is, well, cinematography, and an art in its own right. The power of the image never escapes us in films like *Waterlife*, *Chasing Ice* or *Waste Land*, especially fully realized on the big screen. And the old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" is never truer than in a film like *Manufactured Landscapes*. Documentaries, sure, but visual delights no less, masterfully infused with sheer scope, exquisite detail or unique perspective.

Gallery Night at the Movies is pleased to continue the tradition of the documentary and when featured, these films garner the same engaged responses and elicit as much dialogue as do our fictionalized offerings.

This fall we will be screening the new film *Watermark*, reuniting critically acclaimed and award-winning Canadian director Jennifer Baichwal with celebrated landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky. "[D]ocumenting our engineered manipulation of water, and the far-reaching repercussions of abusing this valuable resource" this timely film will undoubtedly awe us with its images as much as provoke us with those images' implications.

And talk about good stories – where were you in 1979 when Americans were taken hostage in Iran? Was there really a fake movie entitled "Argo" as part of the exfiltration plan? Is there a real Tony Mendez? We've got the true story behind Canada's part in liberating 6 of those hostages in the new film *Our Man in Tehran*.

For more information about our film programmes, visit our website or contact me at the Gallery. And if you haven't seen some of the great documentaries mentioned or alluded to here, we have a full list of all the great films that we have screened, with many of them are available next door at the Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library.