

## Documentary Phenomenon

*The renaissance of documentary filmmaking in the US is a hopeful sign that politics may yet have something of a future in a country dominated by dreary and mind-numbing discussions of the presence or lack of what is called the bipartisan spirit.*

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An extraordinary efflorescence of political documentaries is taking place around the world, not least in the US. Though particular cultural artefacts – manga, anime, chutney, and “world music”, among many others – have taken on transnational forms and flourished in recent years, and though mass and pop culture in their numerous manifestations have come under increased scholarly scrutiny, the emergence of political documentaries as an aspect of world culture is a phenomenon which so far has received little attention. Documentary filmmakers are far from being celebrities, but documentary retrospectives at major festivals are nonetheless now common. The most recent edition of the Sundance Film Festival, now one of the most well known avenues for showcasing independent and avant-garde cinema, especially in the US, commenced with a screening of the documentary, *Chicago 10*, director Brett Morgen’s attempt to bring to life the turbulence of the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the trials of anti-war protestors that came in its wake. To invoke what we might call the contemporary documentary phenomenon is not to suggest that the political documentary has no previous history, nor even that contemporary documentaries are necessarily distinguished by their breadth of vision, cinematic qualities, or more than the ordinary form of political awareness. Nonetheless, it is palpably clear that in countries as diverse as the US, India, Brazil, and Korea, the political documentary is undergoing a renaissance, and that the sheer proliferation and visibility of such documentaries marks a new stage in the history of both this art form and political activism in an age saturated by the image and visual icons.

In the US alone, eight of the 10 largest grossing documentaries in the country’s history have been released since 2002, and documentaries no longer appear to be films

watched only by cinema buffs, activists, or nerds. To underscore this phenomenon, it perhaps suffices to recall that Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) was seen on theatre screens by 15 million viewers within one month of the film’s release. Moore had achieved a considerable measure of commercial success with his earlier film, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), but *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s eventful run points to the much more significant inroads made by this documentary into cinematic traditions and the public’s viewing habits. The subject of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, one might aver, was calculated to arouse common interest, and the searing images of planes plummeting into towers had been, so to speak, handed to the filmmaker on a platter. But Moore’s film, in fact, was scrupulous in steering clear of images that might easily have been exploited to excite patriotic sentiments, focusing instead on the blunders and criminal follies of the Bush administration; moreover, if the subject matter of the film is to be viewed as furnishing ready-made fodder to the filmmaker, it is also notable that no other documentary film on the events of September 11 has achieved anything remotely resembling Moore’s success. But *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s success can be written in multiple registers. Documentary filmmakers who touch upon politics or other volatile subjects have generally always had to wrestle with censorship; but, were we to reflect upon the matter, it becomes transparent that all documentaries are by default subject to the regime of censorship since documentaries seldom obtain commercial release. Though Moore’s films are by no means the first documentaries to have had commercial screenings, documentary filmmakers can, in invoking his example, perhaps aspire to greater visibility and more exposure at the box office.

Just what, then, is the documentary phenomenon, and what might account for the rise, renaissance, or re-emergence of political documentaries? What is it that

documentaries document, and do they perform this documentation with more authority, efficaciousness, and daring than other practitioners of political awareness? Some commentators are likely to aver that filmmaking has been revolutionised by the digital camera and other commensurate developments in technology. Filmmaking has always been an expensive enterprise, and documentarians, in particular, were doubtless hobbled in the past by their inability to raise funds. It would not have been uncommon even 15 years ago to find filmmakers lugging large cameras. Recent technological advances, it is often argued, have democratised the medium, and popular platforms such as *youtube.com* and Google Video hold out the promise of taking this democratisation even further. Not only have more aspiring filmmakers, operating on shoe-string budgets and often armed with little more than a digital camera and computer, stepped into the fray, but it is becoming increasingly possible to overcome the hitherto insurmountable problems of publicity, distribution, and repeated access. By the same token, if the internet is a space of uncharted freedom, there is ample evidence to suggest that it is at least equally hospitable to authoritarian, intolerant, and politically reactionary worldviews. The political documentary so far has been largely animated by an oppositional politics, by a politics critical of dominant political structures, the culture of violence, war and militarism, and (in the plain old-fashioned Marxist sense) ruling class ideologies, but those halcyon days may be short-lived.

It may well be argued that political documentary filmmakers, in particular, have had to take on the role that, to whatever limited extent, television may at one point have performed in several countries. For all their severe shortcomings, the BBC and ITV in Britain were somewhat responsive to documentary filmmakers. American network television has taken even fewer risks. Edward Murrow, the subject of George Clooney’s *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2006), was able to put on a television show, *See It Now*, in the 1950s that puts to shame nearly everything shown on American network television over the last four decades and certainly these days. Mass media outlets have long been captured by the conglomerates, and though liberals like to point to the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), which has a viewing audience that

pales in comparison to the numbers commanded by the rabidly jingoist and scurrilous Fox News Channel, PBS has never been confrontational and very much likes to retain the aura of objective investigative reporting. The films of leading contemporary Anglo-American documentary filmmakers – Frederick Wiseman, Michael Moore, John Pilger, Robert Greenwald, Allan Francovich, Eugene Jarecki, and others – have never been screened on American television. Indeed, many documentary filmmakers have come to the awareness that the extraordinary hold of the mass media over vast sectors of the American population is itself a worthy subject for documentaries, particularly in view of the fact that no country has been so singularly successful in projecting itself as the arch exemplar of a free information society. Robert Greenwald's *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004) tells an obvious but necessary story; and just what is not told on Fox News, or indeed on any other American television channel, is best gleaned by a viewing of Al-Jazeera, the subject of Egyptian-American Jehane Noujaim's documentary of the same year, *Control Room*. It is not merely the Iraq war that the US consigned to what it called "embedded" journalists: nearly the entire American media industry, whether in the domain of print, radio, television, or cable, is comfortably embedded, to the point of corruption and complete capitulation, in the intertwined world of political elites, lobbyists, corporate fat dogs, "consultants", and the numerous varieties of captains of culture.

Whatever one may say about the relative ease with which documentaries can be made today, and, ironically, the immense difficulties that documentary filmmakers, especially those who are committed to a dissenting politics, face in obtaining commercial releases of their films or an outlet on television, it cannot be doubted that the contemporary explosion of documentaries constitutes one kind of response to the utter degradation of contemporary politics. The American invasion and occupation of Iraq is still generating, in the fourth year of the conflict, a stream of films – and as the war's consequences continue to unfold, one should expect and hope that the focus will not remain so maddeningly on what the war means to Americans or what it has done to them. Even the most liberal Americans have a hard time thinking about what the war has done to Iraq. Robert Greenwald's *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006) exposes the immense profits that certain individuals and corporations have stood to gain from the war, and it

reinforces the point that so long as war remains a highly lucrative business, it will undoubtedly have relentless if not cheerful advocates. *The Ground Truth* (2006), directed by Patricia Foulkrod, features veterans of the Iraq war bearing witness to the truth from the ground level; they point not only to the growing unhappiness within the ranks of the US military with the war, but to the manner in which working class Americans, who constitute the vast bulk of the armed forces, have been sold the war.

### Exploration of Systemic Problems

Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2006) is more complex and politically informed in its exploration of the systemic problems which underlie the American aspiration to remain the world's sole hegemon with unrivalled military strength at its command. As Jarecki proposes, the war on Iraq is only the latest instantiation of the aggressive militarism and militancy that, since at least the 1940s, have come to exercise an incalculable influence on the American ethos. The film commences with Eisenhower's ominous warning about the military-industrial complex: much as this warning remains a dominant leitmotiv of the film, the film's rather surprising valorisation of Eisenhower is never wholly persuasive. Jarecki nevertheless deploys all the skills with which good documentarians are armed. The film's title plays upon an earlier film by the same name, a seven-part documentary directed by the renowned Frank Capra to inspire Americans to an exertion of greater energy and patriotism to quell the menace of Nazi and Japanese aggression. Interviews with some architects and critics of the war, public policy analysts, and military historians are interspersed with comments by people drawn from all walks of life – while this is common enough in documentaries, Jarecki is able to suggest the yawning gap that divides common people from the framers of American foreign policy. The film commences and practically ends with comments from a retired New York City policeman, a tragic figure who lost his son at the World Trade Centre bombings and, filled with rage, successfully pleads with the military to have his son's name inscribed on one of the bombs that is rained down on Iraq. If he appears at the beginning and the end to serve as the film's framing device, his intermittent appearances thread the narrative together. 'Why We Fight' sounds as if it were an interrogative, but Jarecki poses no query, nor does he pretend that the documentarian's preeminent task is to document and present rather than to judge.

Quite to the contrary, he is unambiguously clear that American militarism drives the dream of domination and has acquired a frightening centrality in American life.

The war with Iraq and the wider war on terror have been obvious subjects for documentary filmmakers, but so have been the emergence of evangelical Christianity as a major force in American politics, the fortunes of the Bush family, the electoral and political difficulties afflicting American democracy, and the nearly complete corporatisation of large segments of American life. Many films remain resolutely riveted on particular phenomena and personalities, but as *Why We Fight* suggests, a view which reflects a more profound understanding of the systemic transformations to civil society in the US is likely to make documentary filmmakers more effective. The economic democratisation of the medium, for all its welcome consequences, has also sharply reduced the passage of time from conception of an idea to its final execution. Reflection has almost become something of a luxury, and documentary filmmakers, who are susceptible to the same cultural norms as everyone else, display the larger culture's propensity towards black and white characterisations of social and political phenomena. American culture's inability to live with fundamental ambiguities, nowhere more vividly demonstrated these days than in the manichean cosmologies which have been invoked in the war on terror, in the far too easy distinctions between "them" and "us", has yet to be confronted by documentary filmmakers. Nonetheless, the renaissance of documentary filmmaking is a hopeful sign that politics may yet have something of a future in a country dominated by dreary and mind-numbing discussions of the presence or lack of what is called the bipartisan spirit.

Other Recommended Documentaries: *American Blackout* (2006, director Ian Inaba); *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005, Alex Gibney); *The Fog of War* (2003, Errol Morris); *Gitmo: The New Rules of War* (2005, Tarik Saleh and Erik Gandini); *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear and the Selling of the American Empire* (2004); *Howard Zinn: You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (2004, Matt Brown); *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (2003, Marc Achbar); *The Letter: An American Town and the Somali Invasion* (2005, Ziad H Hamzeh); *The Road to Guantanamo* (2005, Michael Winterbottom); *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* (2002, Alex Gibney and Eugene Jarecki); *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005, Robert Greenwald); *With God On Our Side: George W Bush and the Rise of the Religious Right in America* (2004, Calvin Skeggs); *The World According to Bush* (2004, William Karel); and *The Yes Men* (2004, Dan Ollmann and others). **EWJ**

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