

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall



May 2007. What makes a documentary film different from a narrative film? I'm sure we can all see the difference between "Spiderman 3" and "March of the Penguins," but with the advent of historical "recreations" in documentaries, it is becoming an ever-thinning line that separates the two genres.

Before I go further, let's establish an understanding of what composes a documentary film.

A Definition: Documentary film is a broad category of visual expression that is based on the attempt, in one fashion or another, to "document" reality. Documentary, as it applies here, works to identify a "filmmaking practice, a cinematic tradition, and mode of audience reception" that is continually

evolving and is without clear boundaries. In the 1930s, John Grierson's (who is often considered the father of British and Canadian documentary film) principles of documentary were that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form; that the "original" actor and "original" scene are better guides than their fiction counterparts to interpreting the modern world; and that materials "thus taken from the raw" can be more real than the acted article.

We've come a long way from the days of "Nanook of the North," in not only our appreciation of the documentary art form, but in its popularity. Documentaries are no longer simply relegated to the classroom. Cable channels thrive off documentary fare and a budding filmmaker can actually have a successful career in this discipline. Even amateur filmmakers, working with home video, have an appreciation of the discipline. Indeed, documentary standards and styles have become part of the popular culture landscape and language.

Ask anyone about the "Ken Burns Effect," and they'll know what you are talking about.

Can an entire film festival be built on documentaries? Absolutely. There is an increasing demand as audiences become oversaturated with special effects and high-profile summer films.

So what's it like toiling in the trenches and exhibiting new documentary work? I recently spoke with Adam Short who created the Roving Eye Documentary Film Festival in Rhode Island, which is now in its second year. Adam had just pulled

together this year's program, (full disclosure: I am also his boss) we had a lively exchange.

Here's what I learned.

GTM: What was the thinking behind creating the Roving Eye Documentary Film Festival?

Adam Short: There were two motivations behind creating the festival. For our main festival in August, the Rhode Island International Film Festival (RIIFF), we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of films submitted each year. Last year there was a 40% increase from the year previous. And this year we'll have between 2,500 to 3,000 films submitted--up from just over 2,000 last year. By the time the August festival comes around, we've picked the top 10% of the films to screen at the festival.

Problem is--and I'm not even sure if this can really be classified as a problem--there are quite a few great films that just didn't make it because we ran out of venue space. There are only so many spots that we have available to screen films. So, Roving Eye was created as a way to recognize some of the docs that we liked and felt needed an opportunity to be screened. Most of the films in Roving Eye are picked from the previous year's submissions- this year we had about 400 to choose from.

The second reason for the doc fest is related to the mission of our organization. We've always emphasized the community aspect of what we do. During RIIFF, we make sure that film screenings happen in as many communities across the state as we can manage. A big part of what we do and how we see our mission is exposing and educating diverse groups to international and independent cinema. The first year we put Roving Eye together, we planned it as a month long celebration of the documentary film.

We had screenings in six different communities throughout the state. We worked closely with college, universities, community groups, and libraries to promote the event and all the shows were free to the public. We wanted to make the event as accessible as possible to the community- and to this end I feel we were very successful. There was a lot of interest in what we did and the feedback we got was positive.

GTM: On average, how many films do you have to review to build this event?

Adam Short: Last year we had about 25 films, and that was a lot! Unlike the August event (RIIFF), for Roving Eye we are working with a much smaller group and on a smaller scale. The entire month of the festival, I was off running films somewhere- my girlfriend must have thought she was dating a ghost. This year we've scaled back slightly to 15 films. I think it will also give us a chance to put more of a spotlight on the festival and the films.

This year we reviewed between 250 - 300 docs. We looked at the scores and comments that they received from our RIFF reviewers. We also had another set of reviewers look at films just for the doc fest. I personally watch between 50-75 films. Fortunately, we've got a group of top-notch reviewers who give us valuable feedback. It makes a big difference in the quality of the programming to have a group of people with diverse backgrounds and tastes helping to pick the films. It creates a far more interesting mix of films and I think helps the festival speak to a broader audience than if I just picked all the films myself.

GTM: How is this event curated? What makes a film worthy of being in this event?

Adam Short: We're looking for docs that are original in their storytelling or subject matter. A good doc doesn't have to have an expensive budget or to be shot on the latest high-def equipment. In fact, quite a few of the docs we screened are by amateur filmmakers. What we are looking for are compelling stories. We have an idea of who our audiences are and what they enjoy seeing. We like to throw in a few surprises and expose our audiences to a film that they might not have expected. A big part of this festival is the "discovery"- our audiences should expect to walk away with the feeling that they've just seen something new and different. The subject might be a familiar one, but the filmmaker has framed it in a way that makes it seem fresh and exciting. That seems to me to be the key ingredient that differentiates a good doc from a great one. Being able to tell a story so it sounds and looks original- even if it isn't.

GTM: Can you give me some examples of the films you will be screening or films from the past that had an impact?

Adam Short: It's a great line-up this year! Where to begin...? We have a doc from the Sundance Channel that we'll be showing at a local high school called "Crapshoot". It deals with the environmental impact of waste- human waste to be precise. I'm sure the students will enjoy that one. Save-the-Bay, a local environmental group, will be there to give a presentation following the film screening. We'll be working with the Rhode Island Jewish Film Festival to co-promote a screening of "More than a 1,000 Words..." which is about the Israeli war photographer Ziv Koren- he's famous for his coverage of the Israel/Palestine conflict. We'll be down in Westerly at the library this year- this is a new venue for us and it's great to be working with them. One screening that we're particularly excited about is a sneak peak on the life of the author Andre Dubus- he wrote the books for "In the Bedroom" and "We Don't Live Here Anymore" which were made into a films. There is a lot of interest in his body of work and he was a very colorful character. It's a fascinating doc and it should be an interesting screening. The filmmaker, Edward "Ted" Delaney, will be there, along with friends and family of Andre.

GTM: Where does Roving Eye take place?

Adam Short: It takes place at location throughout the state. This year we have screening at the University of Rhode Island Feinstein Campus, Providence; the

Columbus Theater Arts Center, Providence; Roger Williams University, Bristol; the Westerly Public Library, Westerly; the Met School, Providence; and the Courthouse Center for the Arts, West Kingston. We may be adding locations, so I would encourage anyone who is interested in attending the festival to visit our web site at <<http://www.film-festival.org/RovingEye07.php>> or give us a call at the office (401) 861-4445.

GTM: What are some of your goals with Roving Eye and what makes it unique as a means for film exhibition?

Adam Short: Our most important goal is to create an event that is accessible, entertaining, and educational. Because it is conceived of as a traveling film festival, Roving Eye exposes more audiences to documentary films. A big reason why we bring the films to the communities is that- through experience--we know that Rhode Islanders have a very unique mentality about driving distances. I'm guilty of it too. To me, a drive from my apartment in Providence to Newport is an all day affair--I might as well pack a lunch!

Since we knew that our audiences wouldn't drive all over the state to see doc films, we figured the best thing to do would be to bring it to them. Working with local libraries and community groups, helps us to get the word out. As a result, we've got a more diverse audience attending our screenings--which is great, that's exactly what we want to happen.

GTM: Why do you think New England is so rich with smaller festivals and niche exhibition venues?

Adam Short: There is a lot of diversity crammed into a small amount of space. I've lived out West, where there is tons of space and things are spread out over hundreds of miles. In New England you've got history, traditions, and cultural institutions that just don't exist anywhere else in the country. We're also a short drive from two major metropolitan areas--Boston and New York. Everything happens here in a relatively limited amount of space and I think that is why you've got so much happening. There is an intensity and a drive that you don't find in other parts of the country. It's great to feel like you're at the epicenter of it all and I think that's why sometimes New Englanders have a reputation for being provincial. We just get used to the convenience of having so much in the way of culture and arts available to us.

GTM: Why the focus on documentaries?

Adam Short: Every year, we see more and more filmmakers throw their hat in the ring and submit their documentary project. I think filmmakers are starting to be drawn to the genre because it hasn't been explored nearly as much as narrative film has. We felt that it was important to create a platform for the exhibition of doc films.

GTM: Do you think there's a reason that non-narrative films have become so popular?

Adam Short: They are becoming more commercially viable as a form of filmmaking. There is a great need for content right now and media companies are looking for content. I think everyone has either heard or knows of a great story and thinks "Gee, that would make a good movie". The barriers to filmmaking are practically non-existent, it's so inexpensive now to get a decent camera.

And most of us have grown up with television and movies, so we have a cinematic vocabulary- even if we don't use it everyday. So what's to keep someone from going out there and shooting their story? Not much. Docs are a great way to get involved with filmmaking. They are much more dynamic now than they were even fifteen years ago. Look how much publicity films like "March of the Penguins", "Fahrenheit 911", "Supersize Me", and "An Inconvenient Truth" generated. These were docs that did as much business as major fiction films. I think that in the next few years, we'll might even see the number of documentaries being made eclipsing the number of narrative films. It's not inconceivable if you consider the popularity of "reality" T.V. shows and cable news programs. Even networks like the Discovery Channel and the History Channel have become extremely popular. It looks like there is a real shift happening in the film industry away from the dominance of narrative filmmaking.

GTM: So, just who is Adam Short and why should people take notice about this festival?

Adam Short: I'm someone who is really enjoying what he's doing right now and I think this shows in the festival. I get to meet filmmakers from all over the world and see some incredible films. I try to translate that enthusiasm into what I do and get people excited about film.

GTM: What other things do you have in the planning stages that we can expect to see?

Adam Short: Come to the Providence Performing Arts Center (PPAC) on August 7th! That's the opening night of RIFF. We've been planning for this all year and it's going to be a huge kick-off to an awesome week. We've got so much lined up, you'll probably need to write another article! There'll be forums, films, celebrities, workshops, parties, galas, etc., etc.

GTM: What words of advise or encouraging would you give a budding filmmaker?

Adam Short: Don't forget to take off the lens cap!

About the Author:

George T. Marshall is the Producing Director of the Rhode Island-based Flickers Arts Collaborative, the creators of the annual Rhode Island International Film Festival for which he also serves as Executive Director. He teaches documentary film and speech communications at Roger Williams University. He is a director, writer, producer of commercials and industrials for numerous business clients in the region. Currently he is writing a chapter on teaching digital documentary filmmaking for a new college text book entitled: "Teaching with Multimedia: Pedagogy in the Blogosphere/Websphere." He can be reached at <flicksart@aol.com>