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Nonfiction's Future Lies in Optimism

Karen Everett March 15, 2011

In my stay at the Sundance Film Festival this past January, where a film that I story consulted on, *Connected* (connectsthefilm.com), premiered, I saw evidence of what I'm dubbing "The New Documentary Movement," a discernable shift in the spirit and tenor of documentary filmmaking as it's emerging today. The new movement is emerging partly in reaction to two current day realities that, in my belief, are no longer serving filmmakers or our industry or our viewers.

First, a stigma has developed that documentaries are depressing. In America especially, we have a glut of social issue documentaries that preach to the choir, that don't move viewers who aren't in the choir, and that in fact depress most "mainstream" viewers so much they've learned to avoid them!

The second factor is that there are tens of thousands of foundering filmmakers who either never finish their project, or if they do, it sits on a shelf or a hard drive, mostly unseen, rather than finding an appreciative audience. The main reason for this problem is a lack of funding, but the deeper reason I see is an anti-business bias among many highly educated filmmakers who haven't honed enough business skills to pull off a major production.

In today's column, I'm going to share with you the first of four features of The New Documentary Movement. In the next edition, I'll share the remaining three. I hope the new movement inspires you about the possibilities for your own project, so you can create enormously successful films that will change the world.

The first and most defining feature is that these films are hopeful and optimistic rather than depressing, like Constance Marks' documentary *Being Elmo*, which won the Special Jury Prize at Sundance. "Being Elmo" is a story about the puppeteer behind Sesame Street's Elmo, a Muppet that doesn't depend on bad things happening to grip the audience. Viewers were in tears (myself included) from the small acts of kindness that made up that film's plot twists.

Then there are documentaries like the Sundance hit *Sing Your Song*, which is about the activism of performer Harry Belafonte, that don't shy away from terrible events. As you might expect, it was an entertaining film, and it was also a stirring call to correct injustice in the world. When asked by a reporter if he was an optimist, Belafonte replied, "Of course! I live in a perpetual state of optimism...The world is in need of hope. The world is in need of vision."

His "get involved" attitude, along with his music, made it possible to watch the litany of difficult images in the documentary—ranging from police battering blacks in the 1960s South to children starving in Ethiopia—and still come away asking oneself the film's last line, "What can I do now?" In other words, what's my assignment to help make the planet a better place? "Sing Your Song" is a stirring example of the optimism in the New Documentary Movement.

Contrast that with my experience on my last day at Sundance, when the only documentary I had time to see was *To Hell and Back*, a film about a soldier in the Afghanistan war. I really didn't want to see a war film. I knew it would be depressing and just make me mad that we go to war. But it won an award, and as my girlfriend Lynn, said, "Sometimes it's important to see the hard films."

So we saw it. And of course I hated it. Or rather, I hated how it made me feel. That war was stupid and people who fought wars were stupid and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't feel more compassionate or called to action after the film. But I tried to keep an open mind and forced myself to ask, "Could this film help anyone? And maybe it could. After all, the jurors gave it the Grand Jury Prize for Best World Documentary. Maybe it could help someone who was on the fence about war see how futile it was."

It's important to understand that the New Documentary Movement isn't about making films that sugar coat hard realities. And there will always be a place for hard-hitting investigative documentaries like *Inside Job*, *Crude* and *The Cove*. Exposing corruption is important. But many documentaries are emerging these days—and I have had the privilege of working on many films-in-progress like Katie Teague's *Money and Life* and Yehuda Maayan's *Law of the Heart*—that are more interested in generating solutions to today's problems than pointing the finger at the usual suspects. This new breed of filmmakers invite viewers to consider what's possible, rather than dwell on what's wrong. And the trend is a refreshing antidote to the stigma that documentaries are depressing. Ultimately, this movement will vastly increase the number of people who view documentaries in America.

To this end, you see the new movement not only in individual documentaries, but in developments like Oprah's appearance at Sundance to launch her new documentary development fund. She pledged to do for documentaries what her book club did for books—turning mainstream audiences on to this art form. I met one film critic at the HBO party who wondered if Oprah's efforts would sugar coat or dumb down the documentaries she funded, but Oprah is known to be warm and optimistic without shying away from hard realities, so I think it's a great positive development. In fact, at the same party I met director Barbara Koppel, whom Oprah commissioned for one of her first films. She's working with Mariel Hemingway on a documentary about suicide in her family. And Barbara Koppel doesn't shy away from the hard stuff either.

When I returned from Sundance, I held a teleseminar on the topic of the New Documentary Movement. More filmmakers subscribed than we could fit on the free conference call. You can access the recording at newdocedting.com.

Since the teleseminar, I've heard from many subscribers to my newsletter (subscribe at newdocedting.com) who are excited about this trend. For example, filmmaker Cathy Stevulak says, "I am so pleased to hear about the trend in optimistic, what-can-be-done, social issue films." And Scott Ryan wrote to say he's been working on an exciting project called "Manifesto," a documentary-based TV series which followed the stories of activists" in a tone that he calls "the opposite of the news." I also heard from a student at the London Film School who says he's excited about the new movement because in school, he's bombarded with examples of political documentaries that "leave me with an impression of a crumbling society and leaving it at that."

To be continued.

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