

AFM FEATURE

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When Is A Documentary Not A Documentary?

Just How Far Has The Envelope Been Pushed?

Over the last decade or so the art of Documentary storytelling, once confined to the intelligencia, has blossomed. Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth thrust the Genre firmly into the limelight of feature films as a highly regarded and permanent 'must' on any serious film aficionado diary. However a worrying trend has taken root in which the unprincipled of bending the truth has surfaced far more often than is good for the industry or the public at large. For the industry, it's a travesty to corrupt the essence of truth for the reward and ingratiation of 'celebrity status'. For the public, there is the danger they will turn away from this useful 'edutainment' tool that can inform and educate as well as entertain.

The documentary Stolen, purportedly about Slaves and made with financing from the Screen Australia, is the most recent case that has come to light of this unprincipled practice by a limited number of filmmakers that is heaping disrespect on the genre. Filmmakers who respect the powerful tool of film, the universal communicator of the 21st century, use the art of documentary filmmaking to reach and revolutionize the thought patterns of those masses who are dummed down by the bombardment of 'news' on the small screen where Fact and Fiction are constantly skewed.

The Business of Film asked renowned director Philippe Mora, who was in Australia at the time the Stolen story broke, to share his opinion regarding the overall and unwelcome trend that is surfacing with regard to the documentary genre.



Philippe Mora

OPINION

Philippe Mora

Fact or fiction? Senator Tom DeLay (R), aka "The Hammer" and scourge of liberals, recently performed on Dancing With The Stars to "Wild Thing." His hip-shaking exuberance left the Right gob smacked and the Left astounded. Answer: fact. It seemed fake. The moral is: Don't bother to make stuff up. Reality is bizarre enough. Have you observed Ghaddafi's 90-minute ramble to the UN on September 23, 2009?

The puzzling thing is that filmmakers and others are making things up or manipulating or re-enacting reality for a variety of motives, none of them worthy. None of this is new except the sheer quantity of product. The still fast-breeding "Reality shows" are so far from reality they should be called "Amateur acting shows." The cheapness of digital production has created a viral explosion of bogus documentaries. Some by design, some by incompetence.

In his 1994 book, Culture of Complaint, critic Robert Hughes wrote: "... in a time of docudramas and simulations, when the difference between TV

and real events is more and more blurred—not by accident, but as deliberate policy from the bosses of electronic media—such exercises fall into a mushy, anxious context of suspended disbelief that old Hollywood pseudo-history never had."

Things have gotten far worse. In a truth meltdown, where people will do anything to get famous, a parade of books, articles, films and shows have been blasted as frauds, hoaxes or worse. A recent article by Michael Cieply in the New York Times was titled: "At The Toronto Film Festival, Cautions on Documentaries." The piece outlined the compromises and techniques employed, confessed or admitted to by many "documentarians" in recent times for the sake of what they saw as a higher good. Apparently many believe it is OK to lie and fake if the end result is for high moral purpose. One person even admitted to allowing crewmembers to break rabbit's legs in order to get better shots



Robert Hughes Courtesy-canadianart.ca

of hunting rabbits in the wild. The American University issued a report: "Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work." The report exposed the urgent need for documentary filmmaking standards. Basically, in a complicated media mass of information, we are getting false history, including deliberately faked events cutely called "re-enactments" and a jumble of meaningless pap, best exemplified by the Internet's ability to instantly Twitter ANYTHING internationally



Walter Cronkite *Courtesy-scrapetv.com*

as FACT. A fact used to be a pragmatic truth, a statement that can, at least in theory, be checked and confirmed. Now we have “factoids” or just plain old-fashioned bullshit.

-Forget any Walter Cronkite legacy, honor system or journalistic integrity. In a pandemic more virulent than swine flu, truth is consciously, negligently or unconsciously regarded as old school.

Blatant shams – even plagiarism – is quickly labeled “Post-Modern” as a cure all, although anyone trying to find a coherent definition of “Post-Modernism” can end up being extremely puzzled. In documentaries, what started out as the occasional, coy, faked close-up of say, Thomas Jefferson’s hand writing the Declaration of Independence, has turned into fully-fledged fictional recreations touted as legitimate history. The History Channel, or the Hitler Channel as it is called by some, and National Geographic have drifted into some pseudo-scientific investigations of ghosts, aliens and time travel. Shaggy dog stories, treated with solemnity, have become the new science on cable television. Was Jesus an astronaut? This is treated as a question worthy of a Pulitzer Prize.

Filmmakers compound these dubious techniques by often inserting themselves into the film, inevitably acting to hype up the scenes.

When TBOF Publisher Elspeth Tavares asked me to write an Opinion piece about the issue of Fact or Fiction, I was enthusiastic. Why? I am not a bishop of cinema excommunicating filmmakers for blasphemy. Serendipitously, two friends of mine are involved in two controversial documentaries. This sparked my interest and the more I delved into the subject of ‘lies in media’ the more unprincipled much of it appeared.

One film, called *Stolen*, caused a scandal at the 2009 Sydney Film Festival when the main character Fetim, a refugee from the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara, flew to Sydney from Algeria, and dramatically denounced the film as a malicious fraud, since it claimed she was a slave. My friend Carlos Gonzalez, who knew her and her family, had asked me to meet her in Sydney. Oddly, in a belated nod to transparency

including deliberately faked events cutely called re-enactments” and a jumble of meaningless pap

(or “Post-Modernism?”), the producers of *Stolen* had illegally used film shot by Carlos of Fetim passionately denouncing the film, as an epilogue. Because they had used it without his permission they had to cut it out after the Sydney premiere screening. At the festival Q&A Fetim stood up only feet away from the filmmakers, electrifying the audience, some of whom began yelling “Let her speak!” after she had stood for about eight minutes without being allowed to talk. She then let them have it. The Q&A was summarily closed down as emotions ran wild. This debacle turned into a fiasco, some of which is still unresolved today because of outstanding questions of methodology including key mis-translated subtitles, Moroccan involvement, re-enactments, blurred facts, payments to some interviewees, maps and history. Interviewees and other participants have cried foul. Criticisms rained in from United Nations executives, NGOs, anthropologists and even the president of East Timor, Ramos Horta. I outlined my involvement in meeting the alleged slave in Sydney for the August 2009 edition of the *Australian Spectator*. The filmmakers claim the second cut of their film is legitimate. Many simply do not accept this on the facts, and the debate rages on in blogs.

By contrast, the second film, *The Miscreants Of Taliwood*, a hit at Telluride 2009, made by George Gittoes whom I have known for 35 years, is the flip side in terms of unassailable integrity. This film is to shockumentary, what 2001: *A SpaceOdyssey* was to science fiction. Gittoes kicks the genre up a notch. It is excruciatingly honest to the point where George is nearly killed on screen by Taliban gunmen in Pakistan. It is so obvious-



George Gittoes *Courtesy-theage.com.au*

ly not faked that Stephen Farber in the *Hollywood Reporter* described it as “eye popping.” The film, in its real story of film artists and their plight in Taliban-area Pakistan, shows up the timidity of conventional cinema. It demonstrates the distinct lack of hormones of any kind in most mainstream films of any genre.

It also begs the important question: if Gonzo Gittoes can get into these hellish, dangerous places by pretending to clown around, what is Western Intelligence doing? Already described by some critics as a masterpiece, it is a pure documentary in the sense that you can tell everything, however mind-boggling, is real. One sequence, showing how promiscuous male homosexuality is rampant and inevitable in the orthodox Islamic areas because of the religious prohibition on contact with women, must be one of the eye-poppers that Farber refers to. In fact, the theme of my opinion here, fakery in film, is also uniquely addressed in *The Miscreants of Taliwood*, when George himself becomes an actor in a riotous Pakistani production. This film within a film breaks the Fourth Wall. Actually, Gittoes breaks most walls you can think of. This is heightened dramatic entertainment.

There is widespread commentary internationally about the decay of documentary filmmaking and news reporting into a hybrid half-news, half-gossip entertainment stew. This has been fueled by the virulent spread of fake news or just plain lies on the Internet about anything or anybody. Oliver Stone came straight out and cannily said his docudrama *JFK* was a “counter myth” to the Warren Commission, as if that helps find the truth. It kind of did. Throwing every conspiracy theory (including New Orleans gays did it) into a paranoid minestrone, this collection of “myths” actually caused an outcry. In 1991, he showed the film to Congress on Capitol Hill, which helped lead to the passage of the Assassination Materials Disclosure Act of 1992. But Stone never claimed he was literally telling the “truth” in his film. He simply lit a fuse. Many filmmakers now show no such grasp of fact and fiction in history. Stone dis-



The Hoax *Courtesy-cinemablend.com*

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torted history for the purpose of a successful provocation.

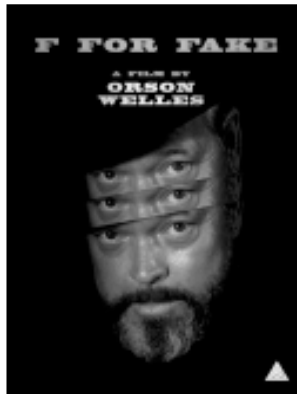
History, fact and news are now all blurred or repackaged into “entertainment.” This is particularly apparent on television where anchorpersons give “opinions” unthinkable some time ago when news reporters were obligated to be neutral. In fact, neutrality in reporting was the hallmark of a professional. Strangely, female newsmen on television have become overwhelming blonde, like a throwback to Fifties Playboy magazine. The opinions given often err on the side of prudery and prissiness. To paraphrase Robert Hughes, what is particularly irksome is the air of sanctimony that wraps these filmmakers and news commentators like a flasher’s raincoat.

This lax attitude to truth in reporting (or giving “opinion” or “entertainment”) has drifted into documentary filmmaking with a vengeance. I am not referring to polemical pieces where the filmmakers wear their point of view on their sleeves or tattooed on their forehead, but actual fakery in the process of making a documentary for the purposes of propaganda, sensationism and/or monetary gain. Some of these techniques would have been unthinkable except in Goebbels’ propaganda machine. They include paying interviewees to make false statements, subtitled translations with incorrect dialogue and facts, re-enacting supposedly real events, blurring or blatantly making false statement of facts, inserting the filmmakers into the narrative and effecting the story to the filmmakers’ motives, deceiving interviewees as to motive, spouting half-truths as full truths, and the parade of chicanery goes on. Even the U.S. Supreme Court is involved in assessing an attack documentary about Hilary Clinton.

Orson Welles predicted all this in two great works. His *War of the Worlds* broadcast (based on the H.G Wells novel) in 1938 with its misin-

terpreted “news” broadcast of a mythical invasion of Earth by Martians, first demonstrated the gullibility of the public. Thousands panicked. More to the point, Welles studied this whole issue in another masterpiece, his film *F For Fake*. This prescient, underrated “documentary” elegantly deals with a filmmaker’s ability to fool the audience. Ridiculed in the U.S. when initially released in 1975, this film is a brilliant watershed examination of truth, meaning and integrity in film. Orson Welles must have been born with two crystal balls, not one, because the film predicts, then unearths just about every issue concerning the power available to filmmakers to manipulate reality like magicians. Some of the main characters are two of the greatest fakers of modern times Elmyr de Hory and Clifford Irving. The movie ultimately hoaxes the audience and Welles says: “For the last 17 minutes I have been lying my head off!”

It is easy to fake things in film. In fact, there is an argument to say that there really is no such thing as a pure documentary in that every shot, every word, every emotion can be manipulated to direct the viewer in a certain direction.



F For Fake Courtesy - eurekaideo.co.uk



Time Cover-1972 Courtesy-select.nytimes.com

All fiction is based in some way on the human experience, and in that sense, based on fact. But names are changed, as disclaimers on film credits have displayed for decades. Fakery in film has become an issue beyond film festivals and the intelligentsia—it can hurt people in their lives. The refugees of Tindouf were deeply distressed by the unsubstantiated allegations that they were slaves.

Where are all these junk food documentaries and works going? Probably into the dustbin of cultural history. Paradoxically, the digital age, which has allowed a deluge of these “documentaries” because anyone can shoot anything anywhere, has a big archival problem looming.

No one knows how long digital information will last in a hard drive or DVD. Archivists worldwide are scratching their heads about this. We know film stock lasts at least one hundred years. This is actually a disaster in the making for good digital works that cannot afford permanent preservation, but the positive side is that a lot of worthless works will simply vanish, and their untruths along with them. ”

PRODUCT PROFILE AFM 2009



Killers - Starring Ashton Kutcher and Katherine Heigl - Available from Mandate