

Foreword: Documentary, Lies and Truth

Thomas Waugh

I started writing this introduction to this marvellous collection of documentary voices coming back on Via Rail to Montreal from Toronto's Hot Docs, one of the most successful documentary festivals in the world. An excellent opportunity for a reflection on documentary in this global moment and also an introit to Bruno Cornellier's unerring compilation. Hot Docs resonated with the voices of documentarists, but their legendary Q and A's, pitch sessions and forums were no match for the seriousness and depth of the voices of Quebec artists from two different periods, the 1960s/1970s, and the 1990s/2000s, which you are encountering in this online issue.

Bernard Émond and Caroline Martel, two of the more quietly imposing contemporary independents, set the pace with their unblinking testimony on their practice within the current landscape. In felicitous juxtaposition, they are joined by two activist documentarists from a whole generation earlier, George Stoney and Maurice Bulbulian, veterans (both still active!) of the mythic «Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle» series that was at the core of Canadian and Quebec documentary for a whole decade starting in the late sixties, though it has never been fully recognized as such by film historians — especially by francophone film studies (less than 500 meagre words in the *Dictionnaire du cinéma québécois!*). In direct relevance to Martel's exploration of the image bank of our collective unconscious, another contemporary independent, Marielle Nitoslawska joins the conversation with a text that speaks not of her own distinctive practice as feminist cinematographer-director, but of the crisis facing the collective practice of those in the current generation who are looking back into the past as well as forward but in doing so pay a punitive price in the current juridico-economic marketplace.

One could say that Hot Docs is a rival to our local Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal. To the latter I bear unquestioning personal loyalty as hometown beneficiary (and twice a programmer in its early years), and am glad that it is so thoughtfully profiled and historically situated in this issue by F.-X. Tremblay. The two festivals are in fact not so much rivals as two parallel universes — just like scores of other Montreal-Toronto institutional twins, from film festivals to cuisine. As I left behind the slow-moving multiple lineups

everywhere of well-trained Torontonians who ended up asking polite but politically correct questions in the polite Q and A's, I decided that 2006 is a slow and polite year, a fatal combination for documentary. For one thing, there was scarcely a film in the whole thing that was not 52 minutes long. It may well be all too fashionable to complain of (and exaggerate) the nefarious influence of television cable windows on the current state of documentary and then blithely continue to nurse our addiction. But the fact remains that Hot Docs and RIDM both offer hard evidence of the polite strangulation of authorial subjectivity, point of view, and aesthetic resourcefulness in film after film — in short what Émond's intrepid interviewer calls «une crise dans le documentaire dit 'd'auteur' . . . [de] la fameuse règle de 52 minutes, à l'inféodation à la télévision, ainsi qu'à la lourdeur et aux exigences de la bureaucratie gouvernementale, notamment en ce qui a trait à la scénarisation ou à la sur-scénarisation des films avant le tournage.»

Speaking somewhat as an insider on one of the Quebecois anglophone productions that bowed at Hot Docs, *Eye on the Guy: Alan B. Stone and the Age of Beefcake* [1], this critique rings all too true. Along the way I had shared my friends' euphoria when the Bravo and Canal D windows and then SODEC dollars finally got firmed up, and when one research breakthrough after another energized the pre-production of a film about a hidden queer history that so deserved to emerge. I grew increasingly uneasy as I would hear of shortcuts due to shortfalls in both funding and imagination on the part of the TV channels and the production companies that are in bed with the whole apparatus of governmentality (the interviews must be dubbed said one participating channel, no dramatization said another, no frontal nudity they all implied without having to say as much, nothing homo in the title of the French version was the final straw). However inspired the film's deployment of stills and archival movies ultimately became, however moving its construction of the biography of the yearning artist at its centre, I finally walked away from this gorgeous and polished documentary feeling secretly disappointed. Disappointed at its formulaic seamless, sanitized and sentimental, over-written and over-narrated treatment of what was after all a fundamentally subversive story of suburban subterfuge in the 1950s, with the richest visual potential of any Canadian documentary of the last decade. Yet I sympathize with the filmmakers and share their frustration, underpaid and overworked, for their film could never have been made without the governmentality and televisionality — all the more so because of the additional pressures of institutional homophobia and the protective eye of relatives and collaborators that always impede on biographical work. This paean to queer desire will certainly reach a broader audience on cable than the late, secretive but brazen Alan B. Stone from Pointe

Claire ever dreamed of, but that's not the only point.

Were these compromises, contradictions and frustrations symptomatic of the whole environment of documentary filmmaking in Canada in the past as well as at the moment? Without a doubt. They are confronted head-on in the piece on RIDM by Tremblay and his two committed programmers, Marie-Anne Raulet and Philippe Baylaucq, but also in the encounters with the five brave documentarists for whom they have always been an everyday occupational hazard in one shape or another. History weighs heavily over this collection, both in the initiative to rekindle the spirit of 1970 and in the voices of the documentarists themselves. What a pleasure it is to read interviews with artists, from both then and now, who talk not only of ethics, struggle and freedom, but also have a strong sense of history, both the history of their artform and of their social context. Documentary culture is often just as amnesiac as any other sector of the industry unfortunately, and to hear talk of Basil Wright, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Chris Marker, Emile de Antonio and *Atomic Café* is more than reassuring.

In the interviews with Stoney and Bulbulian I take particular pleasure, since I was responsible for introducing my 2003 group of MA students to the contradictions and passions of Challenge/Société nouvelle. It was I who forced them to watch *Prince Edward Island Development Plan* (1969) and forced them to go and meet a network of surprised veteran filmmakers in their sixties, seventies and eighties — even nineties — who no doubt thought themselves forgotten. We ended up collectively discovering a whole circle of charming and provocative prophet-artists, as well as a period rich in implications and lessons for the troubled present we live in, wherein too many wheels these veterans invented are now being reinvented. We also discovered a treasure-hoard of over 200 films, 145 in English, 63 in French, two very different corpuses not surprisingly. There is a received wisdom that has accumulated over the years in our discipline that yes Challenge/Société was indeed a fine experiment, but ideologically flawed (I am guilty of leaving the program out of my 1984 anthology *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* because in my 1980s judgment, the governmentally funded films just weren't «committed» enough...), as well as theoretically naive, and moreover no great shakes cinematically speaking. But the literature seldom ventures into the grain and luminosity of those images on the screen. Granted many of the films are documents of the «Process» of community intervention and empowerment, its euphorias and pitfalls. But to our collective surprise, we found that at least half of the films stand alone as films and reward even the most jaded cinephile viewer with their modest yet assured artistry. Both the English and the French

corpuses are full of exemplary works coming out of their Canadian/Quebec cultural roots, their documentary genres and their lively, monumental epochs. Imminent work by Jerry White and Farbod Honarpisheh (the latter a survivor of my 2003 seminar) will help rectify the situation, at least as far as two such films go, *The Winds of Fogo* (1969) and *You Are on Indian Land* (1970) [2]. Part of the process of reclaiming the creative and political energies of sixties and seventies, as the NFB is endeavouring to do at this moment, also involves reclaiming works like the stirring but forgotten *Wilf* (1968) that have been banished to the sidelines because of the unfair stigma that «Challenge/Société» has accumulated, both inside the Board and outside. Clearly, Bulbulian's formulation of the age old tension between social commitment and artistic creativity is one that has not gone away, as Tremblay has also discovered in his probing of the culture of RIDM. In short, this issue of *Nouvelles «vues»* makes a big contribution to the reclaiming of *anciennes vues*. (It is interesting, from the point of view of Concordia's anglo foothold within the Quebec cinema constellation, that Quebec English documentary is represented in this issue by an unilingual American who parachuted into Montreal for only two years!)

Not that the NFB itself offers much help in keeping this history alive, nor history itself in the landscape of documentary practice. I have just finished writing a book on Canadian and Quebec film and video, in significant part on documentary, to be released soon. Among many other things the book is an epitaph for *Passiflora*, a great Québécois documentary, stifled in its cradle by the NFB, whose twentieth anniversary was last year. I am the first to admit that the NFB has made available a great wealth of past works and images through its website and online DVD «boutique,» and through the network of regional «robothèques.» And their facilitation of the project of situating Pierre Perrault within the broader «Rest of Canada» canon (as evidenced by the new book reviewed by Gwenn Scheppler in this issue) is laudable. Yet, for all this fruitful marketing activity, the *Passiflora* syndrome continues, and despite the motherhouse's much vaunted recent commitment to revive and re-invent Challenge/Société, their record in maintaining the availability of the program's output is mixed at best. Not surprisingly, none of the epochal works of Stoney and Bulbulian from Challenge/Société are available in «other-language» versions, either for sale or at the Robothèque. Moreover, the studio's current practice continues the silencing, both arbitrary and selective, of our even more recent documentary heritage. I did not expect the blasphemously pro-abortion, pro-queer papal sendup *Passiflora* to suddenly become mysteriously available for online purchase, but other key works of the last decades are equally absent from your shopping cart. Some of the most celebrated works from the 1970s and 1980s been withdrawn

from circulation (try buying the late Jean Chabot's *La fiction nucléaire*, 1978, a film we need now more than ever). The Board apparently cooperated with Hot Docs' homage to Serge Giguère, but guess whether his dazzling cinematography for *24 Heures ou plus* (1976) or *Passiflora* (1985) was provided subtitled for this prestigious retrospective. Astonishingly even some of the most crucial feminist documentaries of the 1990s, whose continuing market has so clearly been demonstrated, are missing in action: *Forbidden Love: the Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992), never available to francophone viewers despite its strong Montreal component, is now forbidden to anglophones as well, and someone seeking *Desperately Seeking Helen* (1998) will get very desperate indeed. The issue of other-language versioning, always the Achilles heel of this absurdly bicephalous monster, is of course related. There was quite a stir last year on the listserv of the Film Studies Association of Canada, anchored principally in the ROC, unanimously voicing amazement that the current cycle of DVD re-issues of major NFB auteurs like Gilles Groulx, Denys Arcand and Anne Claire Poirier did not include English-version options. All of this is to say that our task of maintaining the visibility of our documentary heritage, not as a museum-based treasure but as a resource of living history, is an uphill struggle against the bizarrely unaccountable bureaucracy of that institution with whom our seventy-year love-hate relationship continues unabated. Hello? Jacques? Anyone minding the boutique?

One concluding clarification about the witty title, in both French and English, of this special focus of *Nouvelles vues*. The association of documentary with falsehood evokes Brian Winston, the skeptical and opinionated dean of documentary studies, and especially his 2000 book, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentary*. The problematic of the truth value of documentary is one that is shared with our current research in the Concordia Documentary Centre, in which I am joined by Marty Allor, Liz Miller and Dan Cross. How has the culture of trust and belief, built up by the witnessing and indexical vocation of documentary film and photography over the decades, been eroded and transformed in the age of digital manipulation and reality TV, we ask, and how so specifically in the Canadian context? Judging from Stoney, Bulbulian, Nitoslawska, Émond, Martel and Tremblay, the answer is hardly at all: the crux of the matter is not lies but truth. So our title «documenteurs/documendacity» is itself stretching the truth. In fact, I have never read a collection of doc commentary more convincingly directed towards the parameters of truth-telling — the truth of social worlds, the truth of artist-subject-audience relations, and the truth of artistic visions of those worlds and relations — and this despite the postmodern collapse of indexicality, the death of the author, the birth of *Loft Story* and all the rest. Who said ethics in this era of Michael Moore, Ben Mulroney and Paul Arcand is obsolete? Does this

collection of *nouvelles* and *anciennes vues* give us a glimmer of hope for an impolite future despite the continuing hegemony of the 52-minute rule? You bet.

[Thomas Waugh finishes his term in 2006 as Film Studies graduate program director at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University. Director of the Concordia Documentary Centre, his six books range from "Show Us Life": Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary (Scarecrow, 1984) to The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas (McGill, 2006).]

Notes:

[1] About the film, see

<<http://www.agq.qc.ca/stone/final%20onesheet%20stone%20copy.pdf>>.

[2] Jerry White, «*The Winds of Fogo*,» and Farbod Honarpišeh, «*You Are on Indian Land*,» in *24 Frames: The Cinema of Canada*, ed. Jerry White (London: Wallflower Press, 2006).