

Over the last few years, there has been a virtual renaissance of the documentary in America, with many feature-length documentaries enjoying unprecedented theatrical distribution and garnering numerous awards, including citation on many critics' Ten Best of the Year lists. As a presidential election year, 2004 saw a marked increase in partisan political documentaries, ranging from Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Robert Greenwald's 'Un' series (Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election, Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War, and Unconstitutional: The War on Our Civil Liberties) as well as other films such as Bush's Brain, Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear and the Selling of American Empire and The Hunting of the President, among many others.

Since these documentaries have not only enjoyed increased exposure but have also stimulated widespread commentary and debate about the nature of the documentary, we invited a number of distributors, exhibitors, filmmakers and scholars to respond to the following questions.

1) How do you account for the recent proliferation of topical political documentaries in the U.S., their increasing appeal to a wider public, and their improved distribution and exhibition?

2) Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the highest-grossing documentary of all time. How do you account for its success? How do you assess its possible impact, either positive or negative, upon other documentary filmmakers? On the future popularity of nonfiction features?

3) Since partisan political documentaries most often end up 'preaching to the choir,' how should politically committed documentarians proceed if they wish to reach a general viewing audience?

4) How do you evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of the recent trend for a more pointedly personal-essay documentary style as opposed to the more traditional, seemingly 'objective' documentary approach blending archival footage, 'talking head' interviews, and voice-over commentary?

5) Are there other documentary traditions or innovative approaches, either in this country or abroad, which are worth renewing or exploring?

We invited our respondents to either respond directly to each question, or to use them as a stimulus for their own personal essay. —The Editors

## Michael Renov

A Professor and Associate Dean of the USC School of Cinema-Television, Michael Renov is the author or editor of several books on documentary, including *Theorizing Documentary*, *Collecting Visible Evidence*, and *The Subject of Documentary*.

Without question, Michael Moore's unprecedented success with *Fahrenheit 9/11* has shone a spotlight on documentary filmmaking while suggesting the efficacy of the documentary as a vehicle for igniting politically charged and highly public debate. But I would argue that these recent breakthroughs—the new commercial life for documentary, the higher profile of the documentary filmmaker, often as a polemicist—deserve to be considered in the light of history.

At least since the late 1920s, documentary practitioners have sought to bring dramatic social conflict to the screen, sometimes in synch with the state, sometimes in opposition to it. Dziga Vertov (*Kino Pravda*), Joris Ivens (*Misery in the Borinage*), and the collective members of the Workers Film and Photo League all recognized the power of the image to rally support for those who struggled. The films made in the 1930s in Great Britain under the guidance of John Grierson (*Housing Problems*), while less radical in their intent, were viewed as persuasive vehicles that could alter the climate of opinion around controversial topics such as slum clearance. Importantly, none of these efforts had commercial success as their goal. Moreover, much controversy surrounds the matter of the size of the contemporary audience for these films. Esteemed though they may be in hindsight, were they able to attract large numbers of people to theaters or alternative venues? Probably not. But should the value or effectiveness of a political documentary be gauged by the size of the audience

or by the depth of impact, far harder to measure? Historically, audience share—as box office or as access to the rank and file—has tended to matter more than the effect upon small but committed audiences.

Enter television. By 1960 and the emergence of the direct cinema phenomenon—and here I refer chiefly to the films produced in the United States by Robert Drew and Associates beginning with *Primary*—documentary makers seized upon television, by now hegemonic, as the delivery system of choice. Although Drew's deal with ABC didn't work out, it was the consensus view that TV, rooted in the American home, was the best way to reach audiences. But as the network news divisions began to flourish (*Harvest of Shame*, et al., followed by the news magazines such as *60 Minutes*), the tenets of journalism—the primacy accorded balanced coverage, the ironclad presumption of neutrality—replaced advocacy with reportage. The direct-cinema approach that opted for revelation over interpretation, long takes shorn of voice-over commentary, interaction or interrogation, was ill-suited to polemics of the sort associated with the politicized output of the 1920s and 1930s. Frederick Wiseman, the remaining *vérité* purist, has been the most consistently televised documentarist ever with a steady stream of films broadcast on public television since 1967. Ken Burns, another PBS stalwart, takes as his subject matter the heartland of American experience, never the radical fringe. Television and documentary advocacy—at least in the U.S.—have proved to be historically incompatible.

But by 1989, filmmakers such as Marlon Riggs (*Tongues Untied*) and Michael Moore (*Roger & Me*) were seizing public attention. Riggs's film, a dynamic manifesto and celebration of black/gay experience, was hotly debated on the floor of Congress when it was revealed

that *Tongues* had received support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Moore's film, the first in a string of personal invectives against the illogic of American conservatism and its ill effects upon working Americans typified by the citizens of Moore's own Flint, Michigan, also proved to be a lightning rod for criticism. Although *Tongues Untied* was indeed broadcast on PBS, it gained notoriety through its festival life and via nontheatrical venues. Moore's film had a commercial release. Neither film depended upon broadcast as its source of production or for its access to audiences.

Moreover, both films coupled political advocacy with personal experience. This filtering of public sphere concerns through the personal or autobiographical has emerged as a consistent characteristic of much documentary filmmaking of the past fifteen years. It offers welcome relief from the enforced neutrality of the broadcast journalists and it meshes well with the increasingly low-cost tools (camcorders, DV camera, Final Cut Pro) that aspiring filmmakers have borrowed from the consumer electronics industry. Home movies have gone public. They have also become, at least on occasion, politicized. Jonathan Caouette's recent *Tarnation* is a gut-wrenching film that tells a complex tale of family dysfunction and shared pathology. Cobbled together from shards of old home movies, family photographs, Caouette's own short films, and photo-booth snapshots, *Tarnation* offers a filmic self-examination that shows us the underbelly of American family life.

But it seems to me that Michael Moore is also an autobiographer or, perhaps more accurately, a personal essayist. It is not just Moore's insistent return to Flint and his working-class roots or the ubiquity of Moore himself within the frame that accounts for his films' autobiographical flavor. His cinema is, above all else, a cinema of 'personal voice,' an approach to filmmaking through which the most diverse source material can be linked and stabilized by the writing and voicing of the maker. In this sense, critics missed the point when they lambasted Moore for implying that a Reagan visit to Flint occurred before rather than after the election in *Roger & Me*. In a Michael Moore film, the visuals are always used to support the polemic, which is, in turn, an extension of Moore's experience and political insight. He is an essayist, a political essayist, in a national culture that expects political *journalism* (i.e., geared to information gathering, image-driven, middle-of-the-road reportage, and, above all, 'balance'). There is a far stronger tradition of the personal essay in France (Marker, Godard, Varda) and in other parts of the world. Cameroonian Jean-Marie Teno's films, for example, (*Afrique, je te plumerai*; *Colonial Misunderstanding*), sharp-eyed commentaries on Africa's colonial legacy, are both acutely personal and unapologetically political.

Political documentary filmmaking in the U.S. has been embraced by a grateful public weary of televised pap. As personal manifestos or political essays, no longer tethered to the censorious norms of broadcast journalism, the political documentary has been reborn.

## David Walsh

David Walsh is the Arts Editor of the World Socialist Web Site, launched in 1998, and has written on film, culture, and politics for socialist publications since 1991.

The "proliferation of topical political documentaries" to which your letter refers seems to me attributable to several, interrelated processes. In the most general sense, it arises from the growing political and social crisis in the U.S. since the late 1990s and an increasing unease within more sensitive layers of the population as to the general direction of the society.

Not only have quite unprecedented events occurred—a manufactured sex scandal leveraged into a near *coup d'état*, the hijacking of a presidential election, the use of the September 11th attacks to launch an assault on democratic rights and the launching of the colonial-style invasion of Iraq—they have taken place without resistance from the ostensible 'opposition party,' the Democrats, and without criticism from the official mass media.

Under conditions of a vast social polarization and deteriorating conditions for millions, discontent has not disappeared in the U.S. It seethes beneath the surface, often bubbling up at present in violent, antisocial acts. The political-media establishment is insulated and isolated; it has become, in fact, a kind of smooth, polished stone, almost entirely impervious to popular sentiment and concerns.

The film studios have developed somewhat along the same lines. Hollywood cinema has always been a business; however, in the 1930s and 1940s and even beyond, its films expressed, albeit in a distorted fashion, something about American life. Today's studio films largely reflect the interests and fantasies of a privileged upper-middle-class layer, hidden away behind high walls.

The extraordinary complexity of American reality only faintly registers in American cinema. Contemporary feature films, in their vast majority, cheat life, either through their triviality, misanthropy or dishonesty. Fiction filmmaking that exhibits a substantial feeling for life is almost nonexistent, and that includes for the most part so-called 'independent' cinema. This will change, but that is the present situation.

It is hardly surprising then, given this generally deplorable state of affairs, that criticism and opposition have been pushed to the cultural margin, so to speak, emerging in one of the few spheres (along with the Internet) still available to them, documentary films. The result has been a relative flowering of this 'margin.' *Fahrenheit 9/11*, with all its limitations, is a genuine social phenomenon.

Moore deserves to be congratulated for his effort. I think the strongest part of his work, and this perhaps separates him from some of the others you mention, is his feeling for the working class in Flint and working people in general. I reject his continued support for the Democrats, but his film no doubt rendered a considerable service.

However, this is a case where the audience created the film as much as the film the audience. There is an overpowering need for works critical of contemporary American political and social life, as well as historical studies—there are innumerable events and trends of the

twentieth century that have never undergone serious examination. The response to *Fahrenheit 9/11* revealed a vast hunger for critical films. Moore's work hardly exhausts this!

In my view, the debate about 'personal' as opposed to 'objective' documentary filmmaking, *cinéma vérité* versus 'Direct Cinema,' the filmmaker as participant as opposed to the filmmaker as discreet observer, is somewhat misplaced, or at least secondary, and has been since the 1960s.

Both sides falsely identify 'objectivity' with impartiality (or perhaps passivity) and impersonality. Can a documentary film be *absolutely* objective in that sense of the word? Naturally not. The physical and mental presence of the filmmaker and the camera always make themselves felt. The issue, however, is not so much the obtrusiveness of the documentarian, but the level of his or her conscientiousness, the degree to which he or she carries out an honest study of the facts, determines their interconnections, and brings out the laws of their movement. Any number of formal approaches are possible on that basis.

In any event, there was an understandable turn away by various nonfiction film trends in the 1960s and 1970s from the 'social realist' documentary of previous decades (often associated with Stalinist or Labour politics), with its somewhat stereotyped and restricted approach, and toward more spontaneous, intuitive work, but, unhappily, the baby has long since been thrown out with the bathwater.

In place of nonfiction films with rather predictable and pat analyses, we have largely been confronted in recent decades with documentaries, both passively 'objective' and self-indulgently 'subjective,' that offer no profound analysis at all: simply heaps of images with no effort to separate the essential from the inessential. We have a great deal of chatter about not wishing to 'impose' preconceptions on reality and the like.

In fact, all filmmakers have preconceptions and all films make social and cultural arguments, no matter how free-form and haphazard their creation may appear to be. Insofar, however, as these preconceptions and arguments are not made conscious and available for criticism, they tend to reflect prevailing, official ideology. And indeed the general trend, at least until recently, has been the production of less pointed documentary works.

Where does documentary filmmaking go from here? First and foremost, in my view, the emphasis must be on the acuteness of the socio-historical analysis. By itself that will not solve all the problems in the field, but no problems can even be seriously addressed without that. Second, there needs to be a revival of an esthetically advanced manner of examining society and history, a means of capturing the truth about life in the richest, most elegant, most penetrating images.

"Preaching to the choir" would not even be an issue were the documentary filmmaker to eschew stale political truisms and bring to his or her work a broad knowledge of life enriched by genuine esthetic sensibility and intuition. Or, in the nineteenth-century Russian critic Belinsky's definition of art, the "poetical analysis of the life of society."

## Paula Rabinowitz

Paula Rabinowitz is Professor of English at the University of Minnesota. She is the author of several books, including *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* and *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism*.

A cinema of memory, documentary claims the past. Even when it purports topicality, responding as new digitized technologies allow to the current moment, documentary produces a record. It memorializes the present for the future, recalling an image almost lost. Documentary is an act of imagination; it forms an image out of unrecognized traces. In retrieving an object, a voice, a scene, documentary fabricates memories. They are there as Dziga Vertov, man with a movie camera, cut and constructed them from the street scenes of Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa; they are found in the stones dotting the tranquil fields surrounding Chelmno where Claude Lanzmann listens to Simon Srebnik, one of only two to survive extermination; they were gathered together from the footage Chris Marker collected to retrieve the dashed hopes of '68 in *Le fond du l'air est rouge* (*A Grin without a Cat*). The remnants stir the imagination.

Already I have forgotten Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* despite seeing it a number of times and having liked it. The audience at Minneapolis's Uptown Theater on my first viewing was young and vocal, unusually rowdy for this liberal Lutheran city. These teenagers, whose friends and relatives were among those being recruited and deployed to Iraq, yelled across the aisles in support of or in argument against Moore's theatrics. The adults seemed subdued, stunned into silence by memories of Vietnam evoked by Lila Lipscomb's mourning. Moore's film is not an act of imagination. Like most contemporary cinema, documentary and narrative, it hews too closely to the literal. Of course, literalness—as displayed by Moore's reading of texts of the USA Patriot Act as he circled Congress—is part of the film's humor, its most effective weapon; even the film's critics can find no factual errors here. As Moore reads the massive text, mostly unread by those sworn to uphold the Constitution and enact legislation, he is performing a memorial act; alerting us to the document itself. But the literal is not the same as the truth—which requires, when disclosing that which remains hidden, more than facts. In Marker's words "the image" demands "the humility and the powers of a *madeleine*."<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of the pervasive use of the almost clichéd depictions of the Holocaust, Lanzmann claims that archival footage contains "images without imagination."<sup>2</sup> Refusing them, he is present ultimately annihilating the distance between the past and the moment of filming, done on 16mm, reloading every eleven minutes, the film is physical: it looks at those who have seen. And we look at them (I just wrote, in a slip of the hands, time). *Shoah* is art, "an incarnation." It verges on the obscene to write about Moore or Robert Greenwald on the same page as Vertov or Marker or Lanzmann. None of their films generated with such energy during this recent election seasons can be mistaken for art. They are the products of a cine-



Michael Moore takes aim at gun culture in America in *Bowling for Columbine*.

matic deflation which has so depleted even so-called independent film, alternative documentaries, and of course Hollywood, of anything resembling art—any seriousness, any sexiness, any humor, any politics—that their "wide-spread exposure" hardly signifies. Yes, *Fahrenheit 9/11* has sparked a hysterical response, websites refuting the film point by point, as if it were meant to be taken as factual rather than as literal, films and speakers denouncing Moore's shoddy journalism, as if the endless spin by cable news experts offers real insight. But perhaps, the point of all these instant documentaries, shot quickly on digital cameras, is their topicality, their immediacy, their pervasive entrance into the popular media—print, web, television, and cineplex.

Paradoxically, I find greater fluency with 'the news' and with the great traditions of past American moviemaking—both Hollywood and government-sponsored documentary—in the endless reruns of *Law and Order* or *Homicide*. Both shows feature stories 'ripped from the headlines' and told with economy, a keen eye for on-location detail and a sharp ear for crisp staccato street talk. They retrieve the feel of liveness so crucial to a sense of documentary realism that Barbara Kopple, who has directed some *Homicide* episodes, evoked in *Harlan County, U.S.A.* This might mean that documentaries might return to the imaginary, to "Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted; making falsehood into truth." "The theory of intervals...the negative of time...the possibility of seeing without limits and distances...."<sup>3</sup> The truth of memory and imagination.

<sup>1</sup> Chris Marker, Immemory proposal (January 1994). Quoted in Bill Horrigan, "Another Likeness," *Chris Marker, Silent Movie* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are from a lecture by Claude Lanzmann at the University of Minnesota, April 2, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Annette Michelson, ed. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 41.

## Danny Schechter

News Dissector Danny Schechter is the editor of Mediachannel.org and has made fifteen films, fifty TV segments and two TV series. For more information, visit [www.Globalvision.org](http://www.Globalvision.org). Information on his latest film, *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception*, is available at [www.wmdthefilm.com](http://www.wmdthefilm.com)

1) The growing appeal of documentaries is a reflection of three forces converging: 1—The deterioration of our media system and the degradation of news that drives many people to seek more diverse perspectives and in-depth portrayals. Increasingly, as we document almost daily on Mediachannel.org, the last place to look for an understanding of the world is our media system. Timely documentaries seem to be part of a docu-democracy movement, an implicit challenge to a system that marginalizes dissent, art, and provocative insights. 2—A realization on the part of distributors and funders that documentaries can make money. Presto: there is a market. Distributors and exhibitors get it. 3—The proliferation of DVD sales and new distribution platforms that make self-distribution more viable.

2) Two cheers for Michael. He has pioneered and stuck to his guns. His track record gave companies like Miramax confidence. They invested. (And later, when problems with Disney surfaced, bought the film back and made even more money.) Michael's film came out in a political season when millions were politicized. Organizations like MoveOn.org helped drive butts into seats on the first weekend. Skillful press and marketing gave the film a larger than life status. Bashing Bush has a big constituency. They knew it. *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s success opened the doors for others. I am sure I was able to attract investors because of its impact but, on the downside, other films are compared to it—often unfairly—and sometime fall short because they lack Moore's celebrity appeal and promotional genius, or lead a jaded industry, which is by nature hostile to outspoken work ("If you want to send a message, use Western Union," is the classic axiom) and avoids political issues. They are

about selling, not telling. My film on the media coverage of the war, *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception*, spawned unflattering comparisons from some critics who would prefer to use my work to denigrate his, and rejections by some distributors tied into larger media companies who don't mind attacking a president but hesitate when it comes to examining the practices of their own industry.

3) I don't agree with that. It's all about marketing. As far as hostility to the media goes, it's a pretty big "choir"—seventy percent according to one recent survey. What I tried to do in *WMD* was to add humor, be provocative, and break some new ground in terms of telling people what they don't know. I see myself as a journalist who makes films, not a filmmaker who just tells stories. I care about information more than goofy characters. I look at institutions, not just evil bad guys we don't like. That is probably why my film is not a bigger hit. It's unfashionable to try to inform audiences or offer counternarratives. (Side note to *auteurs*—look at how the Pentagon borrowed from the Indie Film game plan and stressed storytelling over sloganizing. They based their propaganda on Hollywood Narrative technique.)

4) We seem to live in two worlds of information: fact based and 'faith based.' TV has merged news biz and show biz. Attention spans have been shortened. There's little focus on context and background. Sometimes personalizing films adds an honest and appealing dimension, sometimes not. I do it in *WMD* because I started making it after the invasion of Iraq (I first wrote a book called *Embedded* on the subject) and had no one character that I followed. In a sense I was the character. Also I wanted audiences to know where I was coming from and about my media-insider credentials so that I would be more credible. That worked with some audiences and critics. Others trashed me for imitating Michael Moore (I wasn't) or behaved defensively when I challenged their institutions. It's called denial. I think personal-essay films that don't pretend at phony objectivity can be more honest if you are not just doing a shtick.

5) I think filmmakers should not shy away from controversy and should examine the dissenting traditions of other cultures. We need to help shape an oppositional culture and be part of the struggle for more diverse and democratic media.

Consider the words of Louis Menand in *The New Yorker*:

*It's not surprising that documentary-makers have usually worked in a spirit of advocacy. They are people sufficiently committed to a point of view to go to the trouble of obtaining expensive equipment, carting it into the field, shooting miles of film under often unpleasant or dangerous conditions, and spending months or years splicing the results into a coherent movie. It's easier to write an editorial. It's easier, even, to write a book. People who make documentaries don't make them because they believe that "reasonable people can disagree," or that there are two sides to every question. They believe that there are, at most, one and a half sides—a right side and a side that, despite possibly having some redeeming aspects, is, on balance, wrong. They make movies because they are passionate about their subjects and they want to arouse passion in others, many others.*

Passion is our most important product.

## Thom Andersen

Thom Andersen is the director of *Eadweard Muybridge*, *Zoopraxographer*; *Red Hollywood* (codirected with Noel Burch); and *Los Angeles Plays Itself* and is a member of the faculty in the School of Film/Video at the California Institute of the Arts.

There are three negative reasons for the current popularity of political documentaries—Bush, Hollywood, and television. A hard-core leftist would no doubt insist on the continuity between Bush's foreign policy and that of his predecessors and note that the invasion of Iraq is distinguished from previous American ventures in 'regime change' above all by its openness, its commitment of American resources and lives, and its lack of hypocrisy. But I am not made of such stern stuff. As we like to say, hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue. This was aggressive war, openly prepared and avowed, not a shamefaced secret intervention carried out by surrogates. It was a war few wanted, and their justifications for it seemed desperate from the beginning, as if advanced to convince themselves first of all. "No one doubts that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction"—so no arguments or evidence are really necessary, and the bullying presumption sufficed to discourage any dissent, at least in respectable quarters. In any case, when it's a question of the existence of these weapons, "a lack of evidence is not evidence of a lack." That sounds like the tautological wisdom of Donald Rumsfeld, but I recall it being spoken by our local Democratic congresswoman, Jane Harman. We can laugh at this now, but why did so many take it seriously then? And why haven't Jane Harmon or any of the others responsible for inflicting this war on Iraq and the world shot themselves yet?

The war has cast a pall over all our lives, and we are all driven to try to make sense of it. The newspapers offer little help, and the television none at all. Now that all the justifications for the war have been proven false and it is

perfectly evident that our emperor has no clothes, the press reports that he is sartorially challenged. When it turns out Sean Penn knew more about Iraq (after two days in Baghdad) than the C.I.A., the most humble documentary filmmaker may have more to say than the most lavishly-endowed news channel.

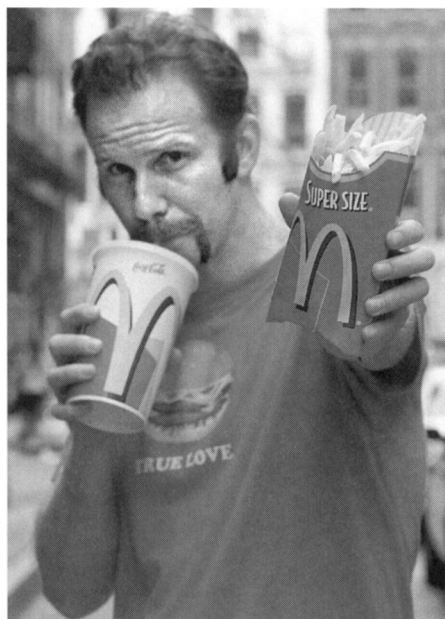
And there is one positive reason: Michael Moore. He has earned the hatred of the right ("He must be French," claims the expert debunker in *Fahrenheit 9/11*—why not secretly Canadian?), but he doesn't merit the kind of rejection he's gotten from many on the left. He even gets blamed for Bush's reelection. Michael Moore didn't lose the election, Kerry lost it because, unlike Eisenhower in 1952 or Nixon in 1968, he didn't offer a plausible alternative plan for terminating an unpopular war. If both candidates pledge to continue a war, it makes sense to vote for the candidate who believes in that war.

In times when Hollywood movies get by because they're slightly better than what's on TV, Michael Moore makes movies that entertain, inform, surprise, and move their viewers, and that achievement is beyond the reach of all but a few Hollywood movies today. They may sometimes offer mild entertainment, but that's the best that can be said for them. It's not surprising that documentaries are so popular now; it's surprising they aren't more popular.

Of course, Moore's documentaries are exceptional, above all for the role he has created for himself within them. This character is remarkable, but certainly not altogether admirable. Although he has a fine sense of moral outrage, he is also a self-important, self-righteous bully with an overweening sense of entitlement and little intellectual refinement. But Michael Moore the filmmaker is not this character. The filmmaker is capable of far subtler effects, and he allows us to view his on-screen persona with some skepticism. When he badgers a cop at Florence and Normandie in *Bowling for Columbine*, I identified with the cop. When he interviews Charlton Heston later in that film, I couldn't help noticing that they agree about gun violence in the United States (it's not the guns that cause it, it's the pathological racism), yet their clashing egos won't allow them to acknowledge this striking convergence. Throughout *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore's montage is more telling than his commentary.

So Moore's essay films don't lend themselves to imitation. When a filmmaker attempts to ape his persona, we get *Super Size Me*. Morgan Spurlock's stunt, like many of Moore's similar antics, seemed slightly bogus to me: if indolence and a bad diet could ruin your health so rapidly, I'd be dead a long time ago.

But at least Spurlock wasn't preaching to the converted: I overheard two fat kids pledging to go on a diet as they walked out of a screening. Exaggerated as the movie may be, I found Spurlock's partisanship tonic. GM spokesman Tom Kay is an essential character in *Roger & Me* because he states truths that Michael Moore can't allow himself to utter (the iron laws of capitalism trump Roger Smith's personal sensitivities, however sincere



Morgan Spurlock demonstrated the nutritional dangers of McDonald's food in *Super Size Me*.



his admiration for Charles Dickens), but I didn't miss the absence of a McDonald's spokesman in *Super Size Me*. The appearance of 'the other side' wouldn't make the film more truthful.

Balance isn't truth (or even objectivity, since there are always more than two sides to every story), it's just a road to the truth. It may be necessary, but it doesn't need to be explicit in the presentation of the argument. And it can serve as an alibi for stealth partisanship or for an ignorant refusal to take sides. That's why so many television documentaries are so frustrating or benumbing. But we know that. Let's move on. In the interim, we can beg PBS to show something by Rithy Panh or something that shows neoliberalism from the other side (if they could give Milton Friedman a platform, why can't they show *The Corporation*?).

### Philippe Diaz

Philippe Diaz, a film producer and documentary filmmaker, in 2003 founded Cinema Libre Studio as an alternative structure for the production and distribution of "intelligent, independent films."

1) This phenomenon has happened mainly because the public is totally disappointed with television in terms of news and subject matter that offers truly unbiased content. In the U.S., there are no longer any TV channels which are *not* owned by a major international conglomerate, where you can find independent and unbiased news. The only places left on cable are BBC, which very few people can see, or Free Speech TV, which most people don't even realize exists. Since Time Warner purchased CNN, the changes in its news coverage have been dramatic, and it continues to change with the recent revamping of its Headline News into a Fox-esque parody. Concerned citizens who want real, unbiased news can't trust CNN any more than Fox News.

Therefore independent cinema distributed through independent theaters is one of the few, remaining outlets to find real news or serious subject matter. When a filmmaker makes a political film, if Blockbuster or Hollywood Video doesn't buy it, it means a large audience simply won't see the film. So people are returning to theaters and grass-root events to find news in America. Without this anti-TV-news effect, political documentaries would not be that successful in theaters.

2) The success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is due to several factors: Michael Moore's personality and celebrity status, the hullabaloo which started in Cannes when his distribution deal was dropped, combined with the *Palme d'Or*, growing anti-Bush Administration sentiment, and the timing in advance of the reelection campaign. We shouldn't forget that the Bush Administration helped mobilize progressive activists in a manner that hasn't been seen in the U.S. since the Vietnam War. The impact of Michael's films, and of *Fahrenheit 9/11* in particular, is enormous. His films prove again and again, particularly to the filmmaker community, that 'documentary cinema' is a totally free medium by which filmmakers can express their views without the risk of being censored.

3) The answer to this question lays in the content of the film. If the content and the form

of the film are definitely on the 'aggressive' or 'provocative' side, it will probably reach the already 'converted' audience. That said, it isn't necessarily a bad thing. Even a convinced audience needs tools, new sources of information, and elements of reflection to convince more people, so these types of movies are important. Now in terms of content, I think the example of *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War* is a good one. Robert Greenwald decided to interview former CIA agents, members of governments, Pentagon officials, and others, rather than the traditional pundits that you can find in every lefty political film. During production, and even more significantly, distribution, we (at Cinema Libre Studio) were able to reach a much larger audience and provoke a lot more interesting discussions than if it had been done the other way. Everyone—except Michael Moore—should think of form and content in terms of reaching or appealing to a larger audience.

4) There is always a part of documentary filmmaking that uses the 'I' to bring the audience to a closer, more personal understanding of the situation. Just because Michael Moore has been particularly successful in this genre, other filmmakers shouldn't think that they too would be successful. It is a very, very risky style and unless the subject is really personal, I think it should be avoided as much as possible. Nothing will ever be more convincing than a director who remains behind the screen and lets his subject(s) speak.

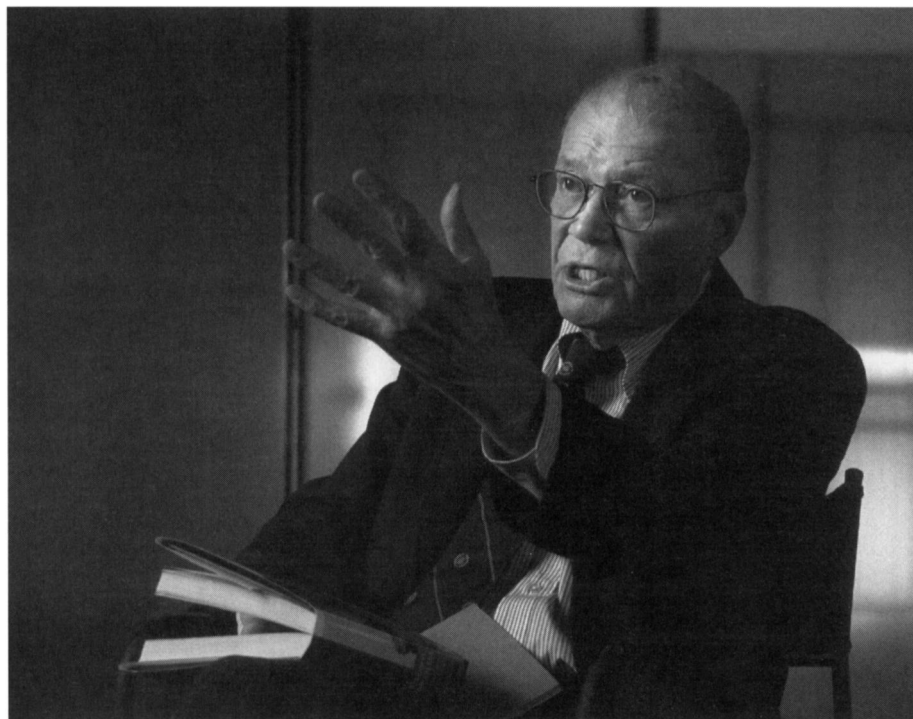
5) Yes, I think increasingly that we are seeing more and more documentaries from countries that focus on people versus a big subject. For example *Born into Brothels*, which focuses on kids, is a much more interesting movie than if it had been a theoretical movie on poverty in Calcutta. An audience will always react better to people stories than theories by pundits.

### Debra Zimmerman

Debra Zimmerman is the Executive Director of Women Make Movies, a nonprofit feminist media organization since 1983, and today the largest distributor of films and videotapes by and about women in the world.

I don't think it is at all surprising that in a hotly contested election year, in the middle of a war, that 'political documentaries' have proliferated and been more widely seen than documentaries in the past. Although Michael Moore's film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, was not the first of the new 'political' films to hit the scene, it certainly was at least partially responsible for the heightened interest in these films. It is important to remember, though, that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a phenomenon that is not likely to ever be repeated. The film won the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes and had access to publicity that any documentary filmmaker (or distributor) would die for. There was also \$15 million behind the marketing campaign. Which is not to take any credit away from Moore. *Fahrenheit 9/11* harks back to films from the late Seventies or early Eighties—films like *The War At Home* and *Harlan County, U.S.A.* The making and distribution of the film was overtly, pointedly, and, to me, wonderfully activist and political. But there was a particular series of events and a particular reason for the success of *Fahrenheit 9/11*—one that might not ever be able to be recreated.

The question really is whether or not this trend of interest in 'political' documentaries will continue now that the election is over. In fact, winding down towards the election, the films that were released later in the year didn't do very well. *Going Upriver: The Long War of John Kerry*, went down before Kerry did. With the exception of *The Education of Shelby Knox*, *Why We Fight*, and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, few of the docs in competition at



Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara holds forth in Errol Morris's *The Fog of War*.

the recent Sundance Film Festival were 'political' films. Even though the war is still raging, the big blockbuster documentary at MIPDOC this year is not *The Shape of the Moon*, which won the Joris Ivens prize at IDFA and a World Cinema prize at Sundance, but *Homo Sapiens*, a \$3 to \$4 million dollar CGI based docu-fiction on the history of man.

But the even larger question, and the reason I put the word 'political' in quotes, is—What is political filmmaking? These same questions were asked on a panel I participated in at the Sundance Film Festival in 2004. If it is just defined as films that comment on politics or that profile politicians—films like *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* or *The Fog of War*—then I think we are looking at an extremely narrow definition. Although I think those two films, and *The Fog of War* in particular, are brilliant, as the old feminist adage goes, the personal is political. And some of the most 'political' films I have ever seen were personal ones. *Love and Diane*, by Jennifer Dworkin, a portrait of a mother and daughter struggling with the welfare system, is an incredibly political film. If a film has the power to make someone think about an issue in a different way, to rethink preconceptions or stereotypes, then to me it is political.

As the Executive Director of Women Make Movies, I have to comment on the fact that the overwhelming majority of the so-called 'political' films of 2004 were made by white men and were about white men. A strange mirror image of Congress, perhaps? Actually, Congress is more diverse than that group of films. *Control Room* is the only one that was directed by a woman and, interestingly enough, the only one that was not focused on white men. But to be fair, this lack of diversity is not just found in the 'political' documentaries. When *Vanity Fair* took a photo of the "New Documentarians" in late 2003 or early 2004, it was a group of white men, many of whom I am sure were surprised to be called "new" to the field. The 'year' of the documentary began in 2003 with *Capturing the Friedmans*, *Spellbound*, and *Winged Migration* among others. Given this, I was very pleased to see *Born Into Brothels*, *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, and *Tupac: Resurrection* among the Academy Award nominated docs. But they are not part of the wave of political filmmaking.

I also really question how many of these political films succeeded in crossing over and reached audiences outside the blue states. So forgive me for being cynical, but if politics is about change, there's not a lot of change going on, at least in terms of who is making the films and the impact they are having. It is really fantastic, for anyone involved with social change media, that 2004 saw a resurgence of interest in politics and that it came on the heels of a year that saw a great interest in documentary. But I really wonder, in the final analysis, if the politics behind *Fahrenheit 9/11* are responsible or if it isn't tied more to the popularity of reality TV. *Super Size Me*, which may have created a genre of 'Documentary Lite' for young filmmakers to emulate, probably grossed more than most of the political documentaries, with the exception, of course, of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. And I don't really think that McDonald's sales have suffered. I hope I am wrong!



An archival clip from Andrew Jarecki's *Why We Fight*, which examines the root causes of war.

### Karen Cooper

Karen Cooper has been Director of Film Forum, a nonprofit independent cinema in lower Manhattan, since 1972. She programs, with Mike Maggione, the theater's premier offerings. More than half the films the theater opens are documentaries. Recent premieres have included *The Corporation*, *Born Into Brothels*, and *The Take*.

The success of the recent spate of political documentaries (Michael Moore, et al.) is, in part, chimerical. When you compare the number of Americans who see Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* to the audience for *Meet the Fockers*, the relatively minor nature of political documentaries' outreach is apparent—and appalling. Most people still go to the movies to *escape* reality, not be confronted or challenged. I have tremendous regard for Moore's ability to commingle his personal brand of irreverent humor and sharp political wit with an agenda that takes aim at the hypocrisy of the powers that be. By transforming his persona into a familiar on-screen everyman, he functions as a kind of Ben Stiller of the left.

The other political documentaries you reference are infinitely less well known by the public. But the question is still a good one: why are documentaries making inroads at all, given their long history of obscurity? I'd speculate that more demanding segments of the public are finally fed up with the drivel that currently passes for entertainment both in terms of television and studio-made movies. For the past twenty years, with the advent of homevideo and now DVD rentals, there has been an ever-increasing number of new releases annually. Most are worse than mediocre, aimed at the lowest common denominator (teenage boys).

Film Forum has been dedicated to exhibiting documentaries theatrically for thirty-five years. We've always worked with those distributors who love movies *and* have a political conscience (New Yorker Films, Zeitgeist, The Cinema Guild, Milestone, First Run Features, First Run/Icarus Films, and a handful of oth-

ers). Why are other, larger distributors actively seeking out documentaries armed with good film festival buzz? Because they go wherever the money is.

Regarding filmmaker/innovators: A few iconoclasts approach politics with an artist's sensibility. Their work packs a punch, but it can also break your heart. The Finnish director, Pirjo Honkasalo, has a new feature-length documentary, *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia*, set among children who are victims of the Chechen conflict. It's a lyrical meditation on the human cost of war, brilliantly photographed, somberly paced, and emotionally wrenching. The great poet/director Werner Herzog's new film, *The White Diamond*, is not overtly political, but, like all of Herzog's best work, it is a meditation on the human condition. A huge white helium-filled balloon, shaped like a teardrop or white diamond, floats above the Amazon canopy as the director waxes philosophic about every man's desire to transcend his mortal fate.

### William Greaves

William Greaves is an Emmy Award-winning independent filmmaker based in New York. He has documented the African-American experience in many films, including such groundbreaking films as *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* and *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*. His most recent film, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2*, explores the creative process in filmmaking.

When I think of the increasingly important role the independent documentary filmmaker plays in our society today, I can't help but salute those filmmakers who have emerged as powerful spokespersons for a better world. Some have given their lives—many if not most have taken the vow of poverty—in order to make sure that the other side of the story is told, what I refer to as the 'truth.' It's extremely encouraging that their voices are being heard in ever greater numbers. But this growing popularity really shouldn't be surprising. It's

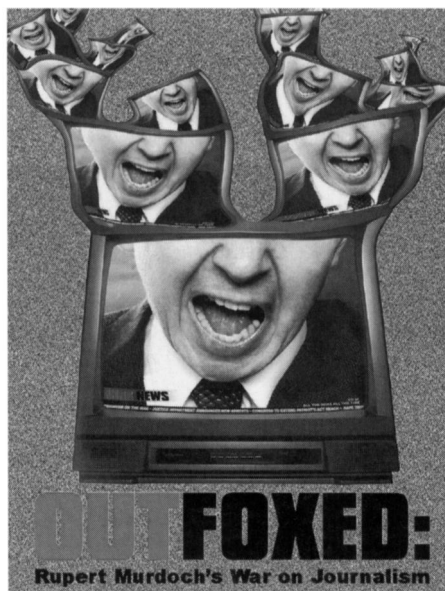
understandable that, after years of being fed a diet of misinformation and manipulation by the mass media, there would be a growing hunger for the 'truth.'

Fortunately truth can be an even more powerful force than propaganda. Obviously, it is the documentary filmmaker's special responsibility to make sure that the 'other' side—the 'true' side—of the story gets told. Of course, there is nothing new in all this. Journalists have helped us see the truth long before there was such a thing as film. The model of a courageous journalist is Ida B. Wells, the nineteenth-century African American whose passion for justice gave her the courage to document the truth about lynching in America and who in the process helped to launch a national anti-lynching movement across the country. In fact it is said that her anti-lynching campaign was one of the major initiatives that inspired the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Pare Lorentz, among the early pioneers in the documentary film, dared to document the ravishing of the American West by the forces of agricultural industrialization, which left barren lands and dust bowls in their wake. His hard-hitting documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains* led to substantial policy discussion by the federal and state governments of the West. Today we have high-profile people like Michael Moore and Errol Morris, as well as many others, less well known, who continue to produce thought-provoking, politically meaningful, and useful work. These films inspire and motivate us to organize mass movements that can lead to political and social change.

In fact, for some time now, there has been a growing concern among thinking Americans about the drift away from the American creed of liberty, equality, and justice for all. This concern is being reflected in the work of the independent documentary filmmaker. The very concept of freedom of speech and the press is being challenged in ever so subtle ways and the voice of reason drowned out by a growing chorus of reactionary voices. There are some in the mass media, government, and other citadels of power who seem more than ready to tear up the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, if not the entire Constitution itself, when it gets in the way of their agendas, and who would like nothing better than to tear up the United Nations Charter and its humanitarian initiatives. The result of such policies can only be disastrous.

The independent documentary filmmaker has an important role to play in helping to stem the tide—dare I call it a 'tsunami'—of misinformation that is pounding away at us. Speaking at the height of the Cold War, Dr. Ralph Bunche, the visionary Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former U.N. Under-Secretary General for Special Political Affairs, declared, "There is not the slightest doubt that by the vicious use of propaganda preying upon the racial and nationalistic hatreds of peoples of the world, that this universe could very shortly again be transformed into a seething cauldron of infuriated nations."



**Outfoxed, another topical documentary, was shown theatrically throughout the U.S. in 2004.**

The lives and works of Ida B. Wells, Pare Lorentz, and Ralph Bunche have been tremendously inspiring for me. I consider it a real privilege to make documentaries about their work on behalf of truth and justice and the good life for humanity everywhere. Discovering their stories and documenting them on film has been enormously gratifying.

One can only hope that the recent attraction of audiences to independent documentary films will continue and that the next generation of filmmakers in their work will continue to search for and bear witness to the 'truth.'

### Clinton McClung

Clinton McClung is the Program Director for the Coolidge Corner Theatre, Boston's oldest independent, nonprofit cinema, which has shown such documentaries as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Corporation*, *Outfoxed*, and *The Fog of War*, among many others. McClung also copresents the Underground Film Revolution at venues throughout the area.

1) There's no denying that we live in turbulent political times in the U.S., perhaps the most divided we have been since the 1970s. In such times it is inevitable that there will be filmmakers, authors, journalists, and activists who focus on bringing a wider public awareness to political issues that they feel are being overlooked by the mainstream media. In the past, the means for doing so was somewhat more limited, and most activists used articles, books, and speeches to spread their views (for instance, look at the underground newspaper explosion of the Sixties). Films were not often one of these tools, since the cost of producing them was prohibitively expensive, and only a few crafty filmmakers were able to make politically motivated films. But most of these films were narrative features with a political undercurrent (from *Easy Rider* to *Bob Roberts*), rather than documentaries.

However, with the rise of digital technology, it is now much more affordable to produce and release an independently made documentary. One can practically make a film all by

themselves with merely the use of a digital camera and a home computer. The rise is quite natural, a combination of the technology being accessible to nearly everyone, and the large number of dissenting voices wanting to be heard.

Still, there is a matter of getting these films seen. Fortunately, the past five or six years have seen theatrical distributors really embrace documentary features. While most of these films play only the art houses in the major cities, this presence still helps them get national press coverage and large homevideo releases that make the films more accessible than ever. For the smaller films, it is now relatively easy to engineer an independent release, especially on DVD. A homevideo release can be built up with word of mouth and Internet campaigns, as well as the increasingly popular 'house party' screenings. In some cases a powerful video release can even lead to later theatrical screenings (as in the case of *Outfoxed* or Robert Greenwald's "Un" trilogy).

It is easier than ever to get a political documentary out into the public. But how do we get them seen by a diversified audience? Very few political documentaries have been seen on television, or have had theatrical screenings on a mass scale (*Fahrenheit 9/11* being a notable exception, though even that couldn't make it to TV in time for the election). Television news and talk shows are just as nonobjective as many of the more liberal political documentaries, and they also simply ignore many issues, but ultimately they reach a massive and diverse audience. So, it is easier than ever to get a political documentary made and distributed, and at the same time harder than ever to have its voice heard above the din.

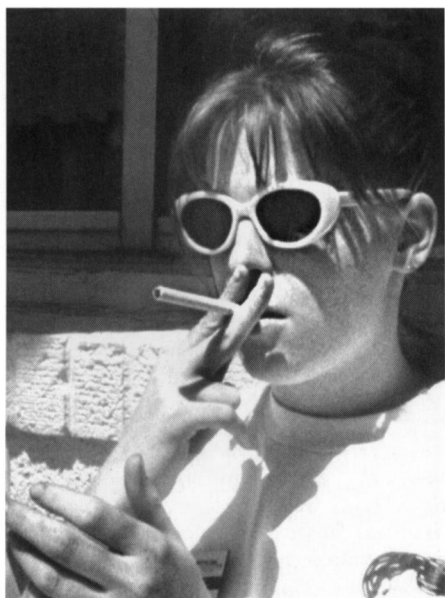
2) It's hard for me to consider *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a documentary, especially in terms of many of the other fine nonfiction films that were released this year. While I was certainly one of the first to run out and see the film, even beforehand I didn't think of it as a documentary, but more as a cinematic manifesto—one that was tailor-made to speak to a specific audience. The more intimate stories of *Spellbound*, *Capturing the Friedmans*, *My Architect*, *Tarnation*, and even *Super Size Me* (a social statement wrapped in a personal narrative) are more indicative of the current state of documentary film than *Fahrenheit*. Even in relation to political documentaries, films like Errol Morris's *The Fog of War*, *The Corporation*, or the upcoming *Why We Fight* are more in line with what I think is the trend—thoughtful examinations of political policies and their effects that don't blatantly tell you what to think, but instead encourage the viewer to make their own conclusions (not that the filmmakers don't have an agenda, they are just much more subtle about it).

*Fahrenheit's* massive success wasn't a fluke. The distributor (or more specifically, the Weinsteins and Moore himself) worked hard to make it more than just a film, but an event. Much like *Passion of the Christ*, the film transcended its genre because it was speaking directly to an audience craving for that voice. Personally, I was very excited to see *Fahrenheit 9/11* because I had been waiting for someone

on the liberal end of the political spectrum to come out swinging against the Bush Administration in the same way that AM talk radio and Fox TV so blatantly coddle them, and I think many of the viewers of the film felt the same way. But I would hesitate to say that *Fahrenheit* is indicative of the success that documentary films have achieved, because it seems to live outside of that. The more moderate but certainly substantial success of the other films mentioned above is the real sign that the genre of documentary is expanding into something that is more than just the occasional release, and instead a regular pattern of motion-picture exhibition. For now it is still limited mostly to the art houses, but isn't that where all the great cinema is born?

3) This was a question that troubled me after seeing *Fahrenheit*, and why I think the less partisan and more considered approach is better. However, that doesn't mean these films don't serve a purpose, even if they don't reach beyond their core audience. I had the great fortune to be able to ask Howard Zinn about this question while leading a discussion after a screening of the recent film about his life, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, and he gave a very thoughtful response. To paraphrase, he commented that the recent rash of political documentary films may not reach beyond the liberal audience that they are made for, but it is always good to keep people active in their political thinking, to inspire them and energize them and let them know that they are not alone in their views. In short, the films provide hope and validation. Even if a movie like *Fahrenheit 9/11* may not change many minds (what can, really, except for a personal epiphany), it can still inspire people not to give up on what they believe in.

4) The advantage of the personal documentary style, and the reason why I think these films are becoming more popular, is that they really involve the viewer in the subject and make them more emotionally committed to the story. In short, it is simply more engaging.



Ross McElwee's *Bright Leaves* blends personal storytelling and social commentary.

But that said, I don't think that the films are veering away from traditional approaches, but that the filmmakers are just becoming more artful in their approach. A film like *The Fog of War* or *The Corporation* is filled with archival footage and talking heads, but they are blended in a way that is more invigorating and visually stimulating than films in the past (most notably those produced for television). All of the different styles of documentary—personal narrative, objective reporting, direct cinema—can connect to an audience if the filmmaker is good enough. Anyone can make a film, but it takes talent and skill to make one that people will want to watch.

5) I would love to see a return to the direct cinema of the Maysles Brothers, a form that I never felt was fully explored. Also, a return to film and less reliance on digital technology would also be a nice change. I would love to see more documentary films that are not only interesting and informative, but also beautiful to look at (*Bright Leaves* is a good example).

And let's do whatever we can to put an end to Reality Television, a sham of entertainment disguised as 'real life.' Bogus!

## Jon Miller

Jon Miller is the President of First Run/Icarus Films, a distribution company founded in 1978, and which specializes in documentaries, including such recent releases as *The Take*, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, and *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia*.

1) 9/11, the War in Iraq, and the elections.

2) Accounting for *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s success, see above, and combine with Michael Moore having already made himself into a celebrity and cultural figure, not just a filmmaker. He was a large part of what was being sold, too. As for his film's "impact," what was the impact of *Harlan County, U.S.A.* or *Hoop Dreams*? Some filmmakers will look for what worked (e.g., was in their eyes successful) and see if they can do it, too. Some of it will stick and some of it will fall by the wayside. I would bet that from a film-making standpoint, *Roger & Me* will prove to have more lasting impact on other filmmakers than will *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

3) I don't know what a "general viewing audience" is or how to reach it. I suppose filmmakers with such concerns should go work for *60 Minutes*. I think politically committed documentarians should try to make intellectually challenging and sophisticated films.

4) I don't know how recent that trend is; it seems like it's been going on for a while. I think it has been overdone because it can be easy and it works (see *Roger & Me* and *Super Size Me*), but there is still certainly room for it. We also need to have space for more challenging films about ideas, films with intellectual structures and arguments, and that go beyond personal stories and structures.

5) They are all worth renewing and exploring. There are no rules or basis for exalting one form or method over another; it is all a question of how you do it. But how many Chris Markers are there? Equally important, the cultural 'gatekeepers'—e.g., TV networks, distributors, exhibitors—should be open to the different forms and methods and not rely only on rigid formulas and formats. ■

## Contributors

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