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The Political Documentary in America Today

Commentary by Distributors, Exhibitors, Filmmakers and Scholars

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

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

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!