

Observatoire du documentaire Documentary Network

FORUM 2006

REPORT

Documentary and Television: From Marriage of Reason to True Love

December 2006

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Forum 2006

DOCUMENTARY AND TELEVISION: FROM MARRIAGE OF REASON TO TRUE LOVE

Friday, **November 10, 2006**, 9 am to 5 pm
NFB Cinema, 1564 Saint-Denis, Montreal
Fee: \$20, lunch and RIDM kit included; students, \$12

This year, on the occasion of Forum 2006, "Documentary and Television: From marriage of reason to true love," the Documentary Network invited the professional community to discuss how to improve the presence and presentation of documentary on private and public television.

Television is the primary mode of distribution for documentary film. Through television, documentary can quickly reach hundreds of thousands of citizens. But audience numbers don't tell the whole story; the *quality* of the viewing experience also counts. The issue for documentary is whether television gives it a form (length, commercial breaks, cross-platform formats) and presentation framework (interview with filmmaker and participants, citizen and expert debates, advertising) that will lead to the film being well received. Does the audience – or rather do audiences – have access to a range of genres? Do current budgets allow the subject to be treated properly? As for documentary itself, is it finding a new face? Is its language appropriate, relevant and bold?

Three multi-generational teams of panellists shared their reflections on the content, form and presentation of documentary on broadcast television: **Fernand Dansereau** (filmmaker, *An Ecology of Hope*), **Nathalie Barton** (producer, *American Fugitive: The Truth About Hassan*), **Yanick Létourneau** (filmmaker, *Chronique urbaine*), **Luc Harvey** (director and producer, *Le Tsunami*, in the series *Tragédies*), **Carmen Garcia** (producer and co-director, *Nadia's Journey*), **Hélène Choquette** (filmmaker, *Bonnes à tout faire*), **Patricio Henriquez** (filmmaker, *Disobey*) and **Martine Asselin** (filmmaker, *Jennifer en 3 temps*).

An intelligent, open and constructive dialogue got under way as representatives from the major public and private broadcasters responded to those reflections: **Jean Pelletier**, Senior Director, Public Affairs, Features and Documentaries, Radio-Canada; **Louise Gendron**, Executive Director, Programming and New Media, Télé-Québec; **Jean-Pierre Laurendeau**, Vice-President, Programming, Canal D; **Jacinthe Brisebois**, Head of Acquisitions and External Production, ARTV; **Lyne Denault**, Vice-President, Programming, Canal Vie.

The moderator was **André Picard**, the meeting secretary was **Geneviève Quessy**, and the Forum 2006 coordinator was **Lucette Lupien**.

The Documentary Network would like to warmly thank the sponsors of Forum 2006: Telefilm Canada, SODEC, the Société civile des auteurs multimédia, the National Film Board of Canada, the Conseil des arts de Montréal, Radio-Canada, Télé-Québec. Special thanks to the Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) for generously hosting the event during their Festival.

DOCUMENTARY AND TELEVISION: FROM MARRIAGE OF REASON TO TRUE LOVE

Reflections on the content, form, and presentation of documentary on television

With filmmakers:

Fernand Dansereau (*An Ecology of Hope*)
Nathalie Barton (producer, *American Fugitive: The Truth about Hassan*)
Yanick Létourneau (*Chronique urbaine*)
Luc Harvey (*Le Tsunami*, in the series *Tragédies*)
Carmen Garcia (*Nadia's Voyage*)
Hélène Choquette (*Refugees from the Blue Planet*)
Patricio Henriquez (*Disobey*)
Martine Asselin (*Jennifer en trois temps*)

and public and private television broadcasters:

Jean Pelletier, Senior Director, Public Affairs, Features and Documentaries, Radio-Canada;
Louise Gendron, Executive Director, Programming and New Media, Télé-Québec;
Jean-Pierre Laurendeau, Vice-President, Programming, Canal D;
Jacinthe Brisebois, Head of Acquisitions and External Production, ARTV;
Lyne Denault, Vice-President, Programming, Canal Vie.

The Chair of the Documentary Network, Manon Barbeau, welcomed the participants and officially opened Forum 2006. A summary of key remarks follows.

Summary of Remarks

Discussion #1 Content

✓ **Filmmakers, why do you make documentaries?**

Nathalie Barton

Why do I make documentaries instead of doing something more rewarding financially ? I came to documentary with a first film on southern Sudan. As a producer, I have a personal set of criteria for analyzing the projects I receive. I always ask myself, Are we going to change the world, even just a little with this film? I accord as much importance to the gaze and tone as to the subject, and I look for that "step sideways."

Fernand Dansereau

Usually a subject grabs me. Sometimes it's a form. I keep thinking about it, it stays with me. I almost always realize later, especially once the drama or documentary is finished, that what I was trying to do by pursuing the project was settle a life issue that was gnawing at me. In retrospect, I think almost everything I've done has been tied to a search for meaning. And that's still what drives me. When that search sets me off again, first I have to find a producer, which is far from easy. It's more than finding someone who will let you in the door, you need someone who shares your understanding and has the courage to take risks. Then, you make the rounds of the institutions and broadcasters with that person looking for funding. That part is very long and occasionally painful. The project always changes a lot over the course of looking for funds. Everyone you talk to wants to pin down the message, and they often change it – not always subtly.

When I was younger, I spent a lot of time ranting against those kinds of negotiations. But over the years, I've realized it often benefited the project. At every stage, the idea matures, gets more refined and acquires more depth.

I've often had that heartrending experience of running into a wall of objections and being dismissed out of hand. Many projects never got made the way they were presented. But in the long run, I realize they never completely die. They keep coming back in one form or another as long as I haven't settled that crucial underlying issue. Over the years, I've come to believe there's a kind of karma that decides the fate of film and TV projects. With time, I realize that, by profession, I'm in a constant dialogue with what you could call the collective unconscious. In other words, whether the project gets made or not doesn't depend on me alone. I'm part of a community, a society. And to a large extent, that's where my inspiration comes from. Much more so than I might have been inclined to think in the past. It's that environment, that community that allows my issue to emerge and meet the shared understanding it needs to blossom [...]

The full text of Fernand Dansereau's remarks (in French) may be found at <http://www.ridm.qc.ca/observatoire/forum.f/2006/dansereau/>

Yanick Létourneau

I always knew I wanted to make films. I'm curious, I wonder about things. The view of the world we get in the media bothers me. I worry about what's not presented. Documentary is a way of bearing witness, of sharing. It's reflection and a search for meaning and it should offer an alternative, another way of looking. The relationship with broadcasters is important for documentary. Television offers funding possibilities but it's also one of the best ways we have to get films out to a wider audience. The relationship with the broadcaster is a chance to have a creative discussion. I see my role as producer as setting up a creative, collaborative partnership between the filmmaker, the producer and the broadcaster.

✓ **And broadcasters, why do you run documentaries?**

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

First of all, broadcasting documentaries is a licencing requirement of the CRTC: we have to fill a certain number of hours. But at Canal D we decided to run additional hours because we believe in documentary. We also produce documentary series to cultivate audience loyalty.

Jacinthe Brisebois

At ARTV, broadcasting documentaries is not tied to licencing. We set aside time for documentary because it's a genre that offers a range of perspectives we think is important.

Jean Pelletier

Radio-Canada has a long tradition of documentary, especially author-driven documentary. We need those if we're going to hear voices that wouldn't be heard otherwise. Radio-Canada Vice-President Sylvain Lafrance has talked about the two things that are important at Radio-Canada – culture and democracy. Documentary is one of the best ways there is to translate those two orientations into reality.

Nathalie D'Souza, Head of Co-Productions and Acquisitions, TV5 Québec-Canada

(Madame D'Souza was unable to attend and submitted her responses in writing).

In the same way that an editorial writer offers an interesting point of view in a newspaper, an author-driven documentary can, when the subject allows for it, have a great deal of impact and shed new light on an issue, which is a way of drawing the television viewer into the debate.

Sylvie Gaudreault, Director, Drama and Documentary, TVA

(Madame Gaudreault was unable to attend and submitted her responses in writing).

We run auteur documentaries because we like a documentary project to be carried by an artist who has a vision and who is driven by a real passion for his or her subject, which makes the proposal unique.

✓ **As documentarists, we emphasize the gaze and the point of view. For broadcasters, the topic seems to have the most clout. Is that true?**

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

The viewer targeted by Canal D is a male between 25 and 50. If it's a compelling film, we take it, even if it doesn't fit our usual criteria. Of course you have to allow for the fact that seeing something on TV is not the same as seeing it in a movie theatre. In the theatre, the viewer approaches the film, while on TV, it's the film that approaches the viewer. He or she

can switch it off. And not every topic makes a good film. Some films are think pieces that should really be books.

Jacinthe Brisebois

For us, the gaze and the originality of the treatment count for a great deal. A film is a risk for everybody. You never know why one film will be successful and another not. Television is a specific case and has its own way of looking at things.

Jean Pelletier

The topic versus the gaze... what's interesting is the discussion that's created among the three partners – filmmaker, producer, broadcaster – and what comes out of that. Documentary is always a battle. And it's not dying out, as someone wrote in *Libération* recently. The filmmaker and the producer have to use the discussion as a launch pad. The real fight is about length. It's the same fight everywhere, in music, theatre... TV's no worse than the rest. We have to ask ourselves whether the subject is really worth 1½ hours. It's no use being dogmatic about length.

Nathalie D'Souza

It's hard to pin down a proportion, but the topic does take precedence over the gaze.

Sylvie Gaudreault

I'd say that for a general audience network like ours, both those things – the gaze and the point of view – are important. But we also pay particular attention to the angle being proposed, since that's what makes a project stand out, something that hasn't been done before and will benefit the network.

✓ **There's a contradiction here. We often have our projects rejected because the subject has already been dealt with. Even if we think we're bringing a new gaze or a new point of view, we're told the subject has been done, the participants are unknowns and so on. Can you address that?**

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

We can change our minds. Contradictions happen to everybody. We have a list of criteria, sometimes we apply them, sometimes we don't.

Jacinthe Brisebois

Broadcasters get a lot of calls. If a topic has been dealt with already, it's hard to take a second film on the same topic.

Jean Pelletier

That's right. Radio-Canada produces a lot of films in-house and at the same time we have to be open to perspectives from outside. We feel obligated, as a producer, to do some topics in current affairs, so those same topics coming from outside will be turned down. We try to give priority to young filmmakers, culture and auteur documentaries. There's no hard and fast rule.

Louise Gendron

It's hard to choose, given the dearth of funding available to us. If there are 26 projects we definitely want, and we can only take 14, of course topics we've done already will be rejected. There is a burgeoning number of documentaries and not enough funding to broadcast them.

✓ **What is your vision of the “ideal” auteur documentary?**

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

Beautiful, well done, inexpensive... Sometimes the daring approach is not to be daring. A good story that is well told, evenly told, well argued – nothing beats that. *Forest Alert*, for example, has a fairly traditional form but it really shook up our society.

Jacinthe Brisebois

Everyone has their own definition of “daring.” There is no “ideal” auteur documentary. It has to offer something new and in that, it is unique.

Jean Pelletier

Exactly. There’s no recipe. The ideal author-driven documentary raises awareness, provokes discussion and takes the medium to a new place.

Nathalie D’Souza

The ideal auteur documentary has a very well-documented point of view and builds a solid argument while putting the topic in context so the viewer can understand the filmmaker’s position.

Sylvie Gaudreault

A catchy topic that brings people together around an issue and responds to a genuine audience need, and an angle with some depth that is original and accessible and gives people food for thought, learning and enjoyment.

✓ **Filmmakers experience difficulties making documentaries. So do broadcasters. What are the difficulties you face?**

Nathalie Barton

It’s hard for small production houses to fund project development. And it’s not easy finding a balance between the need to find subjects with some relevance to Quebec nationalism and the need to attract international buyers.

Fernand Dansereau

The first difficulty is deciding what I really want, and then finding the money to develop the projects.

Yanick Létourneau

One huge difficulty is the lack of dialogue with broadcasters, the lack of feedback on why the project was turned down.

Louise Gendron

Yes, more dialogue would be good, but we get 500 documentary projects a year. Of course we say no to a lot of them! We only develop 2%! The problem is that there is an extraordinary growth of documentary while the federal government is cutting back on cultural funding.

So OK, let’s open a discussion: why is documentary always associated with television? Why not change that? Why not ask how to make documentaries elsewhere than on TV, with

funding other than TV funding? If 92% of documentaries are made with TV, then why not think about the remaining 8%? We get together once a year to talk about our documentary-TV problems... why not ask a different question?

Lucette Lupien, Documentary Network

That's precisely the problem SODEC was trying to solve when it introduced its program to fund feature-length documentary for theatrical release in 2003. We struggled to convince Telefilm to do the same thing; their pilot program was a year old in 2005. We are really hoping it will become permanent in 2007.

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

We get 10 projects a week, which makes 500 a year, somewhat fewer around holiday time... But you shouldn't be discouraged. I always say, every No brings you closer to a Yes!

Jacinthe Brisebois

It's true, we don't have much time to discuss things with the people we turn down.

Jean Pelletier

We designed a simpler specs sheet to make it easier for producers to present their projects. One of the problems for documentary is that it runs up against audience numbers. Name me one TV network that can run documentaries in prime time, given the audience numbers for documentary? Unless you compare it with other shows in the same category. The idea of the auteur is also tough to pin down. Radio-Canada gets 450 proposals a year and many of those are closer to reportage than author-driven documentary. If you define it in the strict sense of the term, an auteur film is very interesting and very rare – rarer than people think.

Nathalie D'Souza

Sometimes what's hardest is the lack of openness to collaborating or discussing things with the broadcaster at the various stages of production... scripting, editing and so on.

Sylvie Gaudreault

The hardest thing, always, is rejecting a project. What we do like and what counts for a great deal with us, is when the "proposers" come up with a project that fits the network's personality. That's much more constructive, both for the people making the proposal and for us.

Speaker from the floor: (unidentified)

I worked for a long time in documentary distribution. What I'm seeing right now makes me afraid for the future of the genre. It used to be nothing but young people and now 3/4 are over 40. And the younger people don't know how to break into the community.

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

At Canal D, we give young people a chance.

Nathalie Barton

Informaction produces about three documentaries by young people each year.

Yanick Létourneau

I think it's the same problem of representation we see in all the media. We need to move towards subjects that young people are more interested in.

Discussion #2 Form

Carmen Garcia

Filmmakers would definitely like more freedom, without limits on form. How do we convince you that our films *will* be successful? Form is no guarantee of success. Some very conventional films are successful. You need appealing characters, an interesting point of view, a relevant message, a little magic, but success largely depends on marketing. The real problem is distribution.

Luc Harvey

For me, TV is a partner. I make documentary series for TV, not one-offs. We need to show a little respect towards the broadcasters. As Fernand Dansereau said earlier, a film is not the work of a single person, it's a collective effort. We also have a responsibility to see that it appeals to a wide audience. And it's important that TV commit to documentary, since TV tends to be swayed by what's trendy.

Hélène Choquette

We need to distinguish between documentary, docu-soap and reality TV. Be careful about *mise en scène*, which doesn't belong in documentary. Be careful that documentary doesn't become simple entertainment, where the subject is just an excuse to put people on stage. First and foremost, documentary should deliver a message.

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

We innovate in the series we do at Canal D, with historical reconstructions for example. You can innovate in different ways – for example, giving a space to people who don't have one. There are some topics we never hear about – disabled people, cultural communities. Innovation might also mean proposing a film with a conventional form and a subject people understand. If we want to change the world, the world had better be watching us!

Louise Gendron

A daring film is often one that mixes genres. You can't set things in stone. There's more than one way to do things. Right now, there is – it's true – some confusion around genres, but that's a reflection of our society. We need multiplicity and the clash of ideas and approaches if we're going to reflect multiple truths.

Jacinthe Brisebois

We need to broaden our scope, stay open-minded about form and not be categorical. We *do* need to avoid the reality-TV trap, but it's important not to "fix" the format by imposing restrictions.

Jean Pelletier

Documentary *is* an artform. OK, we shouldn't be putting restrictions on it, but we do need to set some standards because documentary is a witness to the truth. A witness to the truth, yes, but... reality can be presented in a way that makes the subject exciting.

Comments from the floor.

Manon Barbeau

Form is the filmmaker's individual writing style. There should be as many kinds of cinema as there are filmmakers. When the form serves the message you get films that are personal and powerful.

François-Xavier Tremblay

The form is often a value added. There are many ways to define auteur documentary. We each have our own perception of reality, which is highly relative....

Hubert Gendron

Why separate form from content? The film's message drives its form. When form and content are well integrated, you don't even notice the form anymore.

Patricio Henriquez

Sometimes form is dissociable from content, but ultimately it's the medium that determines the form. We have to format our films around commercial breaks, give them a punchy opening to keep viewers from switching channels, and so on.

Philippe Baylaucq

We have to argue for the signature of the film. The filmmaker has to take ownership, even though the broadcaster also has a say. As Carlos Ferrand once said, If a film is good it's thanks to the filmmaker, but if the film is bad, it's also thanks to the filmmaker.

André Picard, Moderator

There's a confusion about genres in the minds of viewers. What's documentary, what's docu-fiction, what's docu-soap, what's reality TV?... No one knows anymore. We need to educate about media in the schools.

Discussion #3 The environment

Patricio Henriquez

I come from television and documentary both, and the line we're trying to draw between auteur film and television makes me uncomfortable. Let's stay away from rules, because the danger is that they become too rigid. Of course, reality TV shows contribute nothing in terms of innovation, and clearly, *Star Academy* does not deserve to be funded out of the envelopes for auteur film.

By its very nature, documentary needs a time component. Journalism is quick news, documentary needs time for analysis.

Rightly or wrongly, people expect to see more documentaries on public television. We need a clearly identified documentary niche. That seems absolutely necessary for filmmakers. We can't ask broadcast television to go against its own nature. Documentaries have to bend to that reality. Almost all the funding depends on television. We need to find answers with other kinds of funding. That's our fight, and television won't do it for us.

Martine Asselin

There are plenty of innovative, handmade, underground films that need a space. The documentary short, for example, doesn't have much chance of being broadcast on TV. If we want to increase audience numbers for documentary, could we not be doing more in the way of self-promotion?

Lyne Denault

Self-promotion is regulated. It covers Canadian content and has to be one minute per hour for every 12 minutes per hour of commercials according to CRTC regulations.

We're commercial broadcasters. We have to think about viewers. We sell a niche, a community of interest. We don't have a mandate to do documentary – we choose to do it. Canal Vie is interested in Kino. Staying with women, which is Canal Vie's target audience, gives us some leeway.

Jean-Pierre Laurendeau

Canal D looks for entertainment and targets males in the 25-50 generation, but half its audience is actually women. The Kino phenomenon *is* interesting, but the problem with small-scale productions is that they absolutely have to have "Errors and Omissions" insurance, a requirement we set in every case, and they can't afford it.

Jacinthe Brisebois

We make room for young filmmakers, but it's still hard to include author-driven documentaries of varying lengths, Kino and other non-standard short formats. It takes a lot of work. We try to create programs with a recognizable stamp, to cultivate audience loyalty and so that we can include eclectic productions – like the program *Mange ta ville*, for example.

Jean Pelletier

A lot of people think, Hey, this project is perfect for Radio-Canada! Don't give us any projects "made for" Radio-Canada. Challenge us. Present what *you* think Radio-Canada should be running.

At Radio-Canada, we believe it's important to run documentaries in prime time, but we have other priorities too. We've made a number of decisions, such as devoting the Friday 9 pm *Zone libre* slot to documentary. Now we'd like to create an accompanying slot, with a host assigned to present documentary, but we're not there yet – that's the next step. The word documentary is extraordinarily off-putting for viewers. The problem with program slots is a secondary one really.

It's only in the last year that we've begun to do crossover advertising on radio, television and the Internet at Radio-Canada. We'll soon have a dedicated documentary Web site to analyze some of the topics dealt with in a particular program.

THE LAST WORD

André Picard, Moderator

Documentary has to deal with an environment that is being transformed by new cross-platform technologies from the Internet to the iPod. That means an avalanche of spin-off products whose design we hope will be consigned to the filmmaker and not to the distribution company's marketing department. We may even get to the point of planning the marketing components at the outset, to make them an integral part of the project.

I would like to thank all the panellists, documentary filmmakers, producers and broadcasters for their focused and thoughtful remarks, and I hope that the new light they have thrown on these issues will help create a better space for documentary on television.

Summary compiled by Geneviève Quesy.
December 2006

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The Documentary Network extends its warmest thanks to the sponsors of Forum 2006:

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Special thanks for their generous hosting of the event as part of their Festival to the Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM).

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